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NOVELETTE

THE SKULL OF BARNABY SHATTUCK . . . . . **Merle Constiner** **28**

. . . Caught up in a maelstrom of tragedy and murder—could those be credentials for asking questions bound to be resented?

SHORT STORIES

FLAME BIRDS OF ANGALA . . . . . **E. Everett Evans** **14**

The queen would ascend her throne of honor, the gorgeous birds would circle—and then with every observance of tradition the mighty bonfire would be laid.

CHINOOK . . . . . **Mary Elizabeth Counselman** **21**

Urbane, sophisticated, he tried every way on earth to forget the family curse.

A KNOCKING IN THE WALL . . . . . **August Derleth** **63**

No one could be inside the wall, yet the knocking came from there . . . polite, diffident, but determined.

THE LITTLE RED OWL . . . . . **Margaret St. Clair** **70**

. . . Had the Vulture Man really caught him and broken the bones in both his wings?

DATE IN THE CITY ROOM . . . . . **Talbot Johns** **77**

As the old friends walked out of the city room arm in arm, the clock said a quarter after twelve.

THE PRICELESS POLESCU . . . . . **David Eynon** **80**

A legend of the Gypsies, has it that in a violin is imprisoned a soul, a soul that is let out when the violin is played.

AMOK! . . . . . **Harold Lawlor** **86**

Could one argue with a madman's dream?

VERSE

THREE MEN . . . . . **Dorothy Quick** **62**

THE HAUNTED GHOST . . . . . **Clarence Edwin Flynn** **85**

THE EYRIE **6**

WEIRD TALES CLUB **12**

WEIRDISMS . . . . . **Lee Brown Coye** **69**

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

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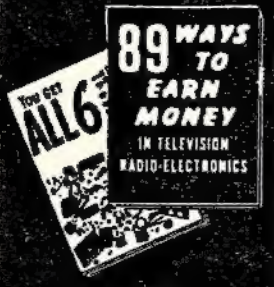

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The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

Referring to your last issue I won't use up much space on the stories. It was a shade above par, but I enjoy them all and in this ish I may have been feeling a little more eerie and therefore enjoyed it that shade more.

I don't like The Eyrie or any such fan letter column, but I admit defeat and will no longer try to eliminate it. I'll even read some of the letters, provided, that you don't allow the writers to include in their letters plugs for their magazine sales of back issues for scalping prices up to and over $8 per. I notice you have ads and that is the place for them. By these plugs I don't include fanzines in the same category. They help increase the interest in our favorite reading, as long as the fanzines remain an interesting hobby to the publishers.

Art improved a lot recently. Pencil sketches showing the subject so distorted as to be disgusting is not an asset to a mag. You can improve more.

Arthur Hayes,
Matachewan, Ontario.

P. S. I'm in your WEIRD TALES *Club.*

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

To date I have always scorned the American fare put forth on our bookstalls, each magazine complete with a lurid cover. However, deciding to try anything once, and not wishing to condemn without reading I bought one of your WEIRD TALES, *and the result is good.*

1. It teaches me something of the American Writer in contrasdiction to British writers.*

2. I enjoy the stories which, although fiction, often have an element of thought in them which really makes me, as a reader, ponder.

3. The stories are good entertainment, and if a particular story does not have great depths of philosophy it is still entertaining. Who wants to think hard all the time, anyway?

Keep it up, and I for one will support your magazine. Incidentally, I am studying Psychology, and am quite certain that books on crime or horror do not create the Delinquents of today. Therefore, if I see your literature attacked in the future I shall raise a banner in defence and go through the streets crying "Down with the Tyrants, Up with the Weirdisms."

Good wishes,
P. D. Demelow,
Salisbury, Wiltshire, England

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

The first 1951 issue of WEIRD TALES *on hand. Glad to see The Eyrie back in the magazine with some worthwhile information and letters. Also is my belief that the majority of W. T. readers would like to see the magazine devote more space to The*

*We don't know whether Mr. Demelow was trying to say "contrast" or "contradiction," but he evolved a good word, anyway.—Editor WEIRD TALES.

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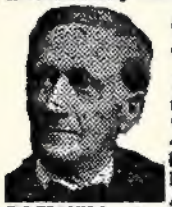

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Eyrie. Perhaps dropping the W. T. Club and letting the fans get together in The Eyrie with their suggestions and letters.

Vernell Coriell,
Pekin, Illinois.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

I have never writen a "fan" letter before, but I was so impressed by the quality of the contents of your May issue that I felt obliged to express an opinion in the hope that this standard will be maintained.

The cover was very fine; I like Coye's work, and the next best cover goes back to his job for March, 1950. Inside illustrations were also very good; none can be singled out as the best.

But the outstanding feature of this issue is Derleth's excellent story, "The Keeper of the Key," written in true WEIRD *tradition. It is, in my opinion, the best story to appear in a long line of your magazines.*

I notice that you used two reprints, and this is a practice that I condone because there were a lot of fine stories which I have never read and would get a chance to read if reprinted in your magazine. "The Isle of the Sleeper" was by far the better of the two, another true WEIRD *tale.*

All other stories were good, but the verse didn't quite measure up to previous issues. "Revenant" and "My Timid Soul" in recent issues, were tops.

I have read some very good and also some very poor issues since I became a WEIRD TALES *fan. I think this one is the best yet.*

If possible, make your fine publication a monthly, and keep up the good work!

Marvin Bender,
210 S. York Street,
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylavnia.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

Your May issue is the best you have put out in a long while, it smacked of the true WEIRD *flavor missing since the old pre-war numbers. Haven't ever seen Bloch in better form, his "Notebook Found in a Deserted House" was a real chiller. I had never thought a Lovecraftian-Mythos tale could be so effective without being written in a pedantic, pseudo-scholarly style! Glad John Thunstone is back and the reprint innovation is great by me. As a matter of fact why not switch* WEIRD TALES *to a pure-reprint format and raise the price to 35 cents. It would be well worth it to read the old classics.*

One peeve; Lee Brown Coye's artwork looks all right in hard-cover Ghost anthologies, but I do not think the front of the May issue will win very many new readers for you. You're not supposed to judge a book by its cover, but an awful lot of people do.

Winchell Graff,
300 West 67th Street,
New York 23, N. Y.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

I have been reading WEIRD TALES *for a number of years and have read quite a few of the old ones, however, it is my humble opinion that your May issue was by far the greatest you have ever put out.*

Shades of H. P. L., the two stories by Derleth and Bloch were the two finest I have read since the old master died. But then, of course, any story by Derleth or Bloch are always tops.

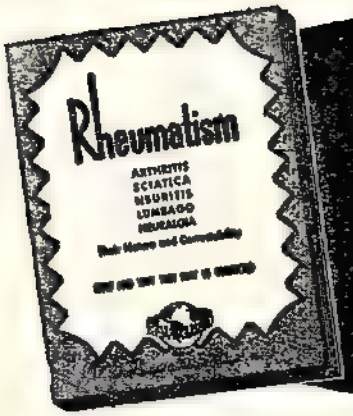
I was glad to track down another "visitation" with my old friend John Thunstone in "The Last Grave of Lill Warran" by Manly Wade Wellman. There have been quite a few stories about ghost-trackers, but for my money I'll take Thunstone. I hope that Mr. Wellman will continue to allow Mr. T. to win out or it will cause my demise should he perish at the hands of one of his weird enemies.

Just one more comment; where is Lee Brown Coye hiding? I miss his wonderful illos. Be that as it may I can truthfully say that this was one of the best W.T.s yet.

H. W. Nintzel,

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

Although I have been reading WEIRD



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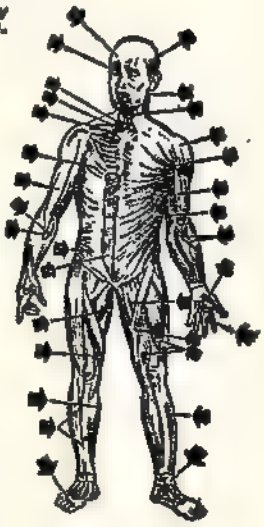

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STIFFNESS — in morning, evening or all day
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PAIN — periodically or continuous
JOINTS — creak or click
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TALES off and on for years, I have never before voiced my opinions. Recently, however, my interest in your magazine has lagged due to the caliber of the stories. There are a few top-notch stories here and there, but it seems to me that so many of your stories use the same plots and themes over and over again. My gripe is that there is not enough new ideas or fresh talent in the treatment of weird fiction in your magazine. I think you need stories with new treatment, ideas, and especially new locales. Too many of their settings take place in old houses with left-over ghosts.

I realize, of course, that everyone can't be a Lovecraft, but they could sure try.

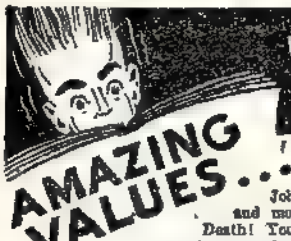
Dalton Simons,
Aurora, Colorado.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

We fantasy readers don't breed beneath stones, and we can't recall being suckled by a wolf when we were babes. In other words, fantasy is our relaxation and provides rich moments for our imaginations which can be rather flexible when your authors give them opportunity to. We don't take fantasy as some sort of an expression of morbid and deranged thoughts, but rather as an extra-curricular tour into a world where the imagination constructs temporary reality out of things from our wildest dreams. And shouldn't one sometimes chuckle in retrospect at many dreams?

The earnest fantasy reader should necessarily become critical of the material with which he associates. WEIRD TALES *may be proud that its stories, on the great whole, are consistently worthy of praise in the fantasy field. Your readers will necessarily attach an amount of personal pride to a magazine which is directed to their particular tastes and wishes. Don't let your cover illustrations let that pride and satisfaction down.*

Robert E. Debold,
San Jose, California.



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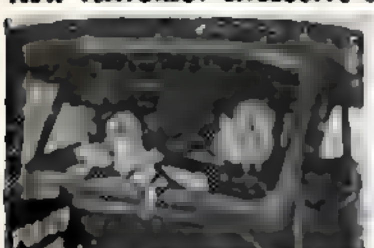

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. . . and every year a new flame bird joined the gorgeous circling band

Flame-birds of Angala

by E. Everett Evans

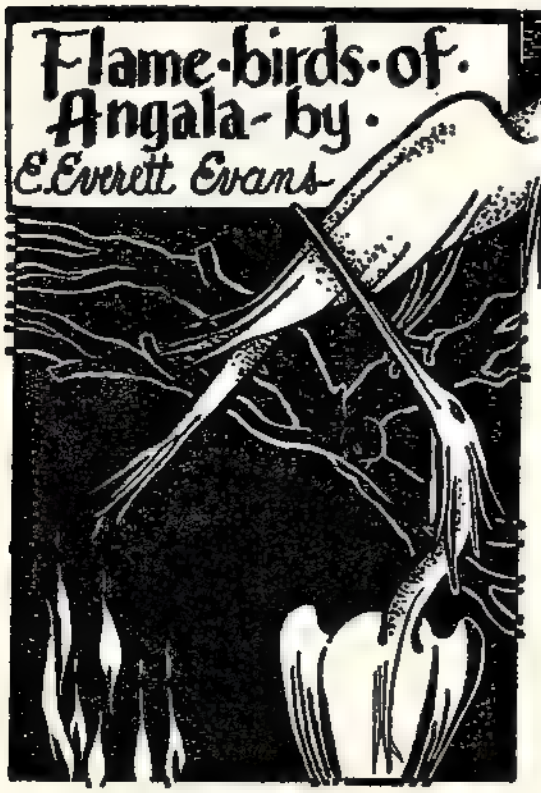
Heading by Charles Kennedy

OLD GRANNY MARKO poured out second cups of fragrant, steaming tea, and passed more of the little seed cookies to her two old cronies. Settling back in her worn old rocker, she broke pieces from one of the cookies and fed them to the beautiful, stately bird on the low perch beside her.

The bird's gorgeous, orange-red plumage seemed almost to light the little room with its brilliance.

"Carlya gets more beautiful every year," Glora Conod leaned forward to stroke the bird's head lovingly. "It's wonderful, the way they never show their age."

"Yes, Carlya is over two hundred years old, but looks no different than when I was a child."



"And you have so many of them in your family." The tone was almost envious. "Where are the others?"

"Flying around outdoors somewhere, probably. They like the fresh air, and to be around people, you know. Yes," the old lady could not help smirking a bit, "our family has been mightily honored through the years."

"The whole village has been blest by their presence," Lizpeth Groll said reverently.

"Do you 'spose they're immortal?" Glora Conod asked.

"Who knows?" old Granny Marko shrugged. "We know that ev'ry so often one of 'em—usually but not always the oldest, according to the records—simply disappears.

Whether they go somewhere to die, or simply migrate, no one has ever found out."

The great bird rested its head lovingly against Granny's arm, an inscrutable expression in its limpid eyes.

Lizpeth Groll had been gazing through the mullioned windows at the view along the tranquil tree-shaded street. Now she spoke suddenly.

"There goes Lilya Gondal, bless her sweet soul and body."

The others leaned forward to look and Granny Marko beamed. "I do declare, it seems almost impossible that anyone could've come to be so loved by everyone in Angala in less'n six months, like Lilya has."

"It certainly was a nine-days' wonder when old Magnus went away last spring and came back three weeks later with her on his arm," Lizpeth said. "I 'member how I gawped with my mouth open at her beauty. We never'd seen nothing like that 'round these parts before. That red hair of her'n, fixed up in a coronet of braids on top of her proud-held head, was enough to make a body think she was a stuck-up prig."

"Didn't take long to find out she warn't, though," old Glora Conod warmly defended the young woman she'd come to love as the daughter she'd never had. "Why, that very afternoon she come running across to my house to ask me 'bout places to shop, and where she could get the best things most reasonable. Made no bones 'bout not knowing nothing 'bout keeping house. Asked my advice 'bout everything, she did."

Granny Marko nodded her silver-snowed head. "She has proper humility, that one," she smiled as memories crowded into the sunlit room. "She's been here any number of times, wanting my recipes, asking how to do this chore and that 'un. She's come around right fast, bless her sweet face. If she has another year there won't be a better cook ner housekeeper in the whole village."

NOR was this feeling of love confined to these elder women, who had nothing to fear from the startling beauty of the newcomer. The young bride had never made any slightest attempt to queen it over others, either because of her beauty, or her position as wife of the town's richest man. Nor had the slightest hint of scandal ever touched her. She was prodigal with her friendship to any and all, but always in such a circumspect manner that none could accuse her of any wrong in deed or intent.

Lizpeth was again looking out of the window. "The flowers are almost all gone. Summer's about . . . say, there's little Dina Klindent with a basket on her arm, turning in to the Kalspell house. Wonder why?"

"Prob'ly taking some sweets to the Kalspell children, who have measles," Granny chuckled. "That one is waging a clever campaign to become this year's Festival Queen."

The two other women stopped their rocking to gawp at her in amazement.

"Dina?"

"Become Queen?"

"Certainly, and why not. True, she's plain of face, her hair is stringy and dull of brown, her figure is awkward and shapeless. Yet she's always cheerful under her load of misfortune. None ever hears her complain."

"True you are," Glora Conod spoke warmly. "She's a lovely spirit, even if gnomish-looking. A goodly lass, and well-loved by all Angala. And the Klindents have no Flame Birds."

"The girl spends more of her time in the service of others than in her own, more's the pity in many ways. She could easily make herself better looking if she but took the time," Lizpeth wagged her head and clucked sadly. Then looked up defiantly. "Yet, if by any chance she's a candidate, I think I'd vote for her."

"And I," Glora nodded agreement. "Such constant unselfishness deserves its reward."

Granny merely smiled wisely. "Either of you girls want any more tea?"

The Flame Bird seemed to be chuckling to itself.

THE huge, golden harvest moon was shining in all its mellow fullness in the late-autumn sky on this night of the Festival of the Flames, a traditional rite in the little village of Angala. From all the streets con-

verging on the village Square, people were hastening to assemble.

On the ridge-poles of the buildings about the Square, hundreds of the brilliant-plumaged Flame Birds sat, apparently interested watchers. Each of the people, as they chanced to glance up at those beautiful birds, would wave a friendly salute.

Every man, woman and child would be there this night. So, seemingly, would all the village dogs, who were everywhere under foot, racing about with a joyous abandon that paid no heed to the jostling feet of hurrying humans.

Oh, it was a happy, laughing, care-free crowd. Everyone in the highest spirits. All dressed in their best bibs and tuckers, gaily bedecked with ribbons and flowers and cockades of the brightest colors.

For this was their Carnival—the Festival of Joy and Thanks for all the good things the past year had brought them.

The little village band of eleven pieces was playing its lustiest, its happiest, its dancingest tunes. Groups and couples were dancing their traditional folk-dances, whirling about the huge center pieces, with shouts of happy laughter.

The center attraction was, of course, the tremendous but as yet unlighted Bonfire-pile, that stood in the center of the Square. And beside it, the companion Queen's Tower.

Little Gordo Panek stood hand in hand with his father, Big Gordo, looking admiringly at the towering pile. Big Gordo had been in charge of its building this year.

"How did you know how to build it, Papa?" the youngster's flashing eyes were taking it all in with bubbling excitement.

"Oh, it's a tradition, Yingling," the elder looked down into the eager young face, a junior miniature of his own. "It has to be done just so, you know, yet each year we try to make it better."

"I bet my Papa's the best old Bonfire builder this town ever had."

Almost as striking to the eye was the thirty-foot Queen's Tower, beside and near the Bonfire-pile. This Queen's Tower was built of sturdy beams and cross-girders, much as they built their windmill towers. The top was platformed and carpeted, and crowned with the throne, a huge chair built of carefully-selected wood, planed and sanded and carved so it was a thing of beauty.

This whole structure was garlanded with green boughs and vines, and bright-hued autumn leaves, and with what flowers had remained in the various gardens.

A ladder was fastened at the back, by which the selected Queen of the Festival would ascend to her throne.

LITTLE Dina Klindent was early on hand, running about, making her presence known and felt, hoping, praying that their love for her would increase enough so she would be selected as Queen this year. It was the wish uppermost in her heart, a burning desire never out of her mind, a thing she felt she must win or die of heartache and disgrace.

She darted up to old Granny Marko, who was painfully dragging her almost withered limbs along towards the Square.

"Lean on me, Granther Marko," she said brightly, slipping an arm around the old shoulders. "I'll help you to the Square, and I've brought a stool along that you can sit on. My little brother is guarding it so no one will get it before you arrive."

"Thankee, child, thankee," the old woman wheezed. "You're a mighty good young 'un. Would you like me to nominate you tonight?"

"Oh, would you, Granther?" the voice was almost shrill with delight and excitement. "I think it would be so wonderful to be Queen. I'd be the happiest girl in the village if it came to me."

"Then you shall have my vote," she sank down gratefully onto the stool. "And I'll tell everyone I see to give you theirs, as well."

Dina danced away to find another she could help. It was thus she tried now, and had been trying all year long since she became of eligible age, to bring herself to the favorable attention of the Angalians.

Suddenly there was a great cry—*"Lilya!"* Crusty old Magnus Gondal was seen making his way through the Square,

his beautiful young wife holding tightly to his arm. Her face was wreathed in smiles of happiness and joy, the great love of her shining about her like a golden aura. The crowd surged toward her; was borne along in her train as an adoring populace follows in the wake of well-loved and respected royalty. The looks of adoration that followed her were a cloak of glory about her. And the usually curt, pompous old Magnus Gondal actully smiling and friendly at her side.

The young men came crowding about, asking her permission to dance with her.

"Would it be all right, Magnus darling?" she asked as the first such came seeking her as partner.

Sensing the question coming he had turned quickly away, that she might not see the pitiful look that flushed his face. It told so plainly his love yet his jealousy; his desire for her to enjoy herself, yet his sorrow that he, himself, was far too old and creaking in the bones to dance with her.

"Eh?" he faced her then, as though he'd not heard. "Oh, all right, my dear." His voice was as gracious as he could make it. "Once around the Square, but then back to me, please. The ceremony will start soon, and I want you by my side when it does."

So great was the number of young men who wished to dance with her that one barely had more than a dozen steps before another was tapping them on the shoulder to exchange.

Yet to each she managed to convey the feeling that he, and he alone, was the one she really wanted to dance with forever; that she wished only him as her partner. It was strange, this power of exuding love she possessed.

She returned to her husband's side, holding his arm so possessively and tenderly, making him, too, feel she had only been doing her duty, while she really had longed to remain with him every moment.

BUT now the senior provost of the village had climbed up onto the little platform built for that purpose several feet up on the base of the Queen's Tower.

"Quiet!"

His stentorian tones rolled out across the Square, and voices everywhere took up the refrain until everyone knew the great moment had arrived.

They silenced their cries of laughter and their dancing, and hurried to gather closely to the base of the Tower.

"The hour is at hand!" the senior spoke in his loudest tones. "We have had a wonderful year here in Angala, our beloved home, thanks to our gracious and beloved Flame Birds. We have lost but few citizens in death, and have gained more through birth. Business has been good for the merchants, and wages high for the laborers. Our fields and gardens have provided well. Yes, it has been a glorious year, and for this we have all given thanks.

"Now we are gathered at this time when we show our thanks in a more ceremonious way—with our annual Festival Bonfire. And, of course, as is our custom, the first official act is the naming of our Flame Queen. Nominations are now in order."

"I name Dina Klindent!"

Old Granny Marko's quavering voice was heard first. As eldest resident of Angala it was her right, by custom, to make the first nomination—everyone waited for her either to do so or to decline.

A shout went up. "Dina! DINA!" as others of the throng seconded the naming.

Little Dina beamed and beamed on everyone, shyly thanking those closest who turned to congratulate her on the honor.

But hardly had these shouts ceased when there was another great cry, taken up by voice after voice until the whole village echoed and re-echoed with it.

"Lilya! Lilya Gondal!" Higher and higher went the cry. *"We want Lilya for our Queen!"*

A momentary pain appeared back of old Magnus Gondal's eyes at the shout. Then he turned to smile fondly at the beautiful, blushing child-woman beside him, so pleased, yet so surprised that this honor should be offered her.

She held up her hand.

"Quiet! Lilya wants to speak!"

"Thank you all, dear people, for doing me this great honor," her sweet young voice penetrated the most distant corners of the

Square, so clear and distinct it was. "But I feel it is one I do not deserve, because I am not really one of you—yet. I'm a newcomer, almost a stranger in your midst. Why, I've not been here even half a year. I feel you should confer this wonderful distinction on someone who was born and raised here. I cast my vote for sweet little Dina. She is one of you."

Pandemonium queened for minutes. Shouts rang out from nearly everyone, arguing either for Dina or for Lilya. So great was the uproar that even the village dogs joined in, their frenzied barks and howls but increasing the tumult of sound that filled the air for miles around.

In the midst of all this many began noticing that the Flame Birds on the surrounding roofs had turned their backs on the Square. The Senior Provost called frenziedly for quiet. And since, on these occasions, he was the absolute law of the village, those nearest finally ceased crying for their favorite candidate and took up his demand for silence. In time, then, the throng stilled once more and listened to him.

"It is a beautiful tribute to two charming and lovely women that they should have so many and such vociferous supporters. But it is against the dignity of this, our most reverent Ceremony, that such a clamor as has just been aroused take place. We have even displeased The Birds, as you can see. We must be more orderly and reserved in making this momentous decision."

People looked ashamedly at the distant birds, and became hushed. Many fell to their knees and stretched out imploring arms to the birds. Slowly, the beautiful creatures turned back to face them.

"Now, are there any further nominations?"

There were none, so the senior addressed the people again.

"We shall have to put this to a counted vote, since it is apparent we will not be able to tell from the volume of sound, as is usually the case. I want Abel Gadsden and Linus Hogarth up here with me."

The two junior provosts pressed through the crowd to take their places on either side of him. The little platform sagged a bit but held. Big Gordo Panek had builded well.

"Now, let's open up along this line," the senior waved his hand to cut off the right-hand third of the crowd. "Make a lane a couple of feet wide down through there, and keep it open."

Shoving good-naturedly, with many quips and sallies, the people did as he commanded.

"Now, on this other side, another lane," and soon the people were divided into three about-equal groups.

"Abel, you count the right-hand group, Linus the left-hand, I'll take the center. All right now, folks, all who wish to vote for Dina Klindent to be your Queen raise your right hand!"

The press of the crowd was so great that none within it could tell how the vote was going. Only the three men, standing higher than the others, could possibly see them all. They were swiftly counting, yet it seemed ages to the eager individuals in the throng before they finally conferred together, and then came the decision. The Senior faced them and raised his hand.

"Dina Klindent, three hundred and seventy-seven votes."

A great yet decorous cheer from Dina's adherents rent the night sky in their jubilation. It would be close, they knew, but they felt they had won.

"Now, all who wish to vote for Lilya Gondal, raise their right hands," the senior ordered when quiet was again restored.

Rapidly the three men counted again, while the people stirred restlessly, as though unable to await the outcome. Little Dina Klindent trembled, white-faced and tense, and had to be supported. Lilya Gondal, however, seemed unperturbed, smiling still as she always did.

The counting finished, the three provosts conferred momently together, adding up their tallies. Then the senior faced the now-pin-dropped-quiet audience once more.

"Lilya Gondal, three hundred and eighty-four votes!"

The shouts and cheers before had been loud, but the one that followed this victory, while still decorous and not the uproar heard that other time, seemed to make the very ground tremble. Even the Queen's

Tower and the great Bonfire-pile seemed to sway and shake, as every one, winner and loser alike, joined in hailing their chosen Queen.

Old Magnus Gondal, eyes dimmed with tears, turned and gathered his beautiful young wife in his arms. He seemed oblivious of the throng about him, of customs and etiquette, as he kissed her with a passion and a longing that made even those closest almost ashamed to witness. She clung to him as tightly, and she returned his kiss as passionately.

Such was the power of feeling generated by the great honor the people of Angala had just bestowed upon her.

BUT they could stay thus only a moment. Willing and reverent hands were upon Lilya's arms to escort her to the ladder by which she would ascend to her Throne of Honor. The senior provost soon forced his way to her side, and it was upon his arm she leaned as they made their way to the rear of the tower.

Slowly, with dignity, the Festival Queen climbed the rungs of the ladder. Each step was signal for a great cheer from the delighted populace. When she finally reached the top and had seated herself on the great throne, their voices were lifted in the traditional *Hymn of the Flames* that was always sung at this point but never, publicly, at any other time during the year.

The hymn finished, the newly-elected Queen rose. She raised her right hand, holding as her scepter the huge bouquet of beautiful field flowers that had been awaiting her on the throne.

The crowd caught its collective breath. She was so beautiful—so every inch a splendid Queen!

"My beloved people," that sweet, clear voice rang out, "we are met here this night to give thanks for the bountiful harvest we have just reaped, and for all the great blessings and benefits that have been ours this past year. Our Flame Birds have well protected us, and have brought us many, many blessings—far too numerous to recount now. And so, according to the tradition whose beginning none now knows,

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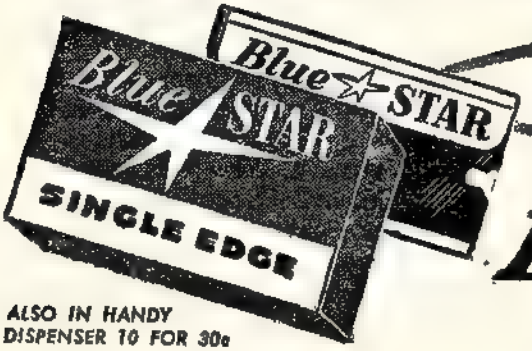

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but which we all understand and revere, we give Ritualistic Thanks by the burning of this Ceremonial Fire. It is time now to light it. Take your places!"

Quickly all ran to form a circle completely surrounding the base of the huge pile. Each man, each woman, each child held a flame. Their Queen was watching closely, and when she saw that all were ready and waiting, she hesitating but the barest second, gave the signal by throwing her bouquet high into the air toward the top of the Bonfire-pile.

As one, each flame was applied to the dry straw protruding from the base of the pile for that purpose.

Their Queen resumed her seat, watching. If she knew any feeling of nervousness, none could see it in her proud bearing.

Almost instantly the fire was leaping high through the carefully-built pile of dry straw, leaves, twigs, and cross-laid logs. Higher and higher the flames mounted until the whole was enveloped by a tremendous blaze.

The little band was again playing frenziedly, valiantly, but few could hear. For its music was drowned out by the happy shouts of joy and cheer of the whole people, who, hand in hand, were serpentining about the great Bonfire.

Even old Granny Marko, her palsied limbs upheld by willing young arms, joined them. So, too, did Magnus Gondal.

The dogs began baying to the harvest moon.

The Flame Birds rose on mighty pinions that seemed, in the fire-tinted night, to be pure flame. With wings beating in perfect rhythm, they slowly circled the Square in intricate evolutions.

From his platform on the tower, the senior provost carefully watched the progress of the flames. Two husky young men, the Hettick brothers, beyond all quibble of doubt the best loggers in the village, stood with their heavy-bitted axes, awaiting his command.

When the flames were at their zenith, the senior waved his hand to them. Their axes raised and flashed in the fire-glow. So perfectly in tune were they that their strokes rang out as one.

At that sound the villagers stopped their dancing and stood expectant. At the second double-stroke, they sank to their knees, their arms and hands uplifted, their faces tense . . . waiting.

The third stroke, and the Queen's Tower creaked, then listed. Another stroke, and over and farther over it leaned.

A final *snap* of splintering wood at the fifth stroke, and the tower-top touched the flames.

From the hushed throats suddenly came strange words—unknown words in an unknown tongue not their own—*"Vahni tekelos ombit!"*

Three times that mighty incantation was shouted in chanting unison . . . then came a silence that constricted the throat.

Staring eyes peered upward anxiously into the flames.

All breathing . . . all life . . . seemed to stop, save for a mighty surge of *Will* that could be felt; of *Faith* that could not be denied.

Then a tremendous shout of joy. For, winging upwards from the flames, swept another of those beautiful flame-plumaged birds.

On graceful wings it soared up . . . up. And in its wake, in perfect alignment, followed all the other Flame Birds of Angala.

Almost out of sight in the flame-lit night, the column curved and plummeted downward. Just above roof-level they circled three times widdershins about and around the village.

Then, while the other birds returned to their vigil on the ridge-poles, the newest Flame Queen of Angala sank gracefully on fluttering pinions to come to rest on the shoulder of Magnus Gondal.

But on the frings of the again-happy, cheering throng, little Dina Klindent wept out her heart in bitter frustration.

Chinook

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

Crazy coincidence. Death-wish stuff? Perhaps!

THERE is something about "Indian Summer" that frightens me. To most people, I suppose, this season of falling leaves and dying flowers and birds flying south imparts a feeling of wistful sadness. "The melancholy days are come, the saddest of the year . . ."

But that is not what I mean. Autumn, I think, is the season of ghosts. (Else why, indeed, is October 31st celebrated as All

Heading by Boris Dolgov

Hallow's E'en?) I believe there is a certain mystic *weakness* in the air at this time—when nature is at its lowest ebb, the way the human body is said to be at midnight. Whatever subtle powers of resistance we may set up in Spring, or Summer, or Winter disintegrate somehow in Autumn, allowing certain Forces to assail us from planes beyond the one we understand.

I believe John Barradine felt this, keenly. In my opinion, looking back on the whole strange affair, I think it was not the actual date (November 19) that filled him with such unreasoning terror, but the *season;* the time of year when all things that belong to nature must die and go back to her to complete the endless circle of creation. Leaves must fall, flowers must die, and return to the earth to make more leaves and flowers. This is nature's pattern, and all the creatures of the forest obey it unquestioningly. It is only civilized man who thinks he can take a law of nature and twist it to his own ends, or even discard it entirely if he likes.

John Barradine convinced me of this, in a way that makes me shiver uncontrollably whenever I remember . . .

Barradine was the most urbane, the most sophisticated man I have ever known. I met him at a book-authors luncheon in Florida, at the Venice Writers' Colony. We were down there on the staff together, lecturing —I to publicize fantasy fiction, Barradine to plug his book on Indian relics and customs; one of the best I have ever read on what I had considered a rather dull subject. It was a busy session, and we saw little of each other except at meals. Barradine had his own little group of would-be non-fiction writers, and I had my classes in fantasy. Now and then we did glance across the screened patio of the Country Club and smile and nod—but I dislike tall, faultlessly groomed men with a little mustache, who talk with a Harvard accent. Barradine, I learned, had acquired his along with a Ph.D. and a Phi Beta Kappa key that he wore rather ostentatiously, as if to impress us. I had decided that I did not care much for his whole personality, or for anyone as sure of himself as he seemed to be. Then one of my students, a nice old lady whom everyone called "Al", dropped a remark that shattered my casual opinion of my fellow-lecturer the way a violin note can shatter a wine glass.

"Poor man," she murmured over a spoonful of mint ice. "He's so horribly afraid of those Indians, he couldn't sleep last night. He has the room next to mine, and I heard him pacing up and down the . . ."

"*Indians?*" I came to a point like a bird-dog scenting game. "*That* man?" I laughed aloud; the idea was completely absurd. Barradine—afraid of getting scalped, like a small boy coming home too late from a double-feature western. Barradine, who knew all about Indian history and the present meek existence of the Red Man on various reservations over the country. Barradine, leaning on the club bar with a cocktail held in one lean pale hand and an ivory-tipped monogrammed cigarette in the other. A man like that, having nightmares about Geronimo attacking a wagon-train?

My dinner companion looked at me and smiled gently. "No, really. It's a phobia—he told us about it in class. He's been to ever so many psychoanalysts about it. His migraine headaches, I mean . . ."

"What migraine headaches?" I prodded impatiently. "You mean he . . .?"

"Yes," Al clucked her tongue sympathetically. "I knocked on his door last night when I heard him groaning. He was striding up and down, up and down, with his hands to his head. I . . . There wasn't anything I could do for him, except offer him an aspirin. He told me he has them all the time—sharp blinding headaches. They're not physical; they're psychosomatic. Imaginary. Or that's what the doctors all tell him. He's tried everyway on earth to forget about that family curse . . ."

"*What* family curse?" I broke in, in thwarted curiosity. "Please! Start at the beginning, will you? Tell me . . ."

"About Dr. Barradine?" My friend blinked at me in surprise. "Why, I thought everybody— Well, it's all very queer. You knew he has Indian blood? His great-grandmother was a full-blooded Chinook."

"No! Really?"

I PEERED sharply at my fellow-lecturer, and decided there was something acquiline about his profile, at that; something dark and brooding about his straight high forehead and sombre black eyes. There were also lines of pain etched deeply between his brows, and blue circles under his eyes that spoke of sleepless nights. Previously, I had decided that Barradine merely looked dissipated, like many another successful writer who shuttles between Florida and New York, working too hard and living too fast.

But now, again, my opinion was changed. There was something decidedly odd about my fellow-lecturer, and I was annoyed with myself for not having noticed it before.

There was fear in those black, close-set eyes; a dull gnawing fear that, now and then, betrayed itself in a little tic at the corner of Barradine's thin mouth.

"But that's ridiculous!" I burst out laughing again. "There aren't any hostile Indians any more! Every school child knows that, and certainly an authority like Barradine . . ."

"Oh, that's not what he's afraid of," my companion said complacently. "You see, his great-grandfather married into the Chinook tribe and *joined* it—by blood rites and fasting. That was in 1810, I think he said. About five years after the Lewis and Clark expedition. There were 16,000 Chinooks then—a great tribe. Hunters and salmon-fishers, living along the Columbia River in what's now Washington."

"Uh-huh," I fidgeted. "But, the curse . . .?"

"I'm coming to that," Al said cheerfully. "Seems there was some kind of plague about then, and over half the tribe was wiped out. They fought desperately to survive and not be absorbed by the incoming tide of white traders, or by other Indian tribes. A proud lot, the Chinooks, with permanent wikiups, slaves, a language all their own, and well-made canoes and weapons. That's the tribe Dr. Barradine's great-grandfather joined when he married a daughter of the chief Kukúsim. They weren't just friendly with him as a white hunter. *He became one of them . . .* You understand what that means, how a white man would have to change his whole way of thinking?"

I nodded impatiently. "Oh, sure. Plenty of white traders went squaw-man during the pioneer days! What has that to do with . . .?"

My friend shook her head emphatically. "Not a squaw-man. He became an *Indian*, a member of another race. A simple, savage race bound by certain beliefs and customs. Just as we are bound—you and I, for all our high-flown talk about not feeling any race-prejudice! *Every* race is prejudiced against another race. Actually, the Indians are the proudest of all, and the most resentful when a member of their color marries someone who is white, or black, or yellow. Because it's wrong. Nature didn't intend it, just as she doesn't intend for dogs and cats to mate."

I PURSED my lips, chuckling. "Huh! I never thought of it that way. Of course, they hated our taking their land—but it just never had occurred to me that Indians might resent being absorbed by the white race!"

"Ask one sometime," Al said simply. "Even Dr. Barradine, with all his college degrees and fame as a writer, is proud of his Indian blood. But he's afraid of it, too," she added, glancing over at him as he rose and left the patio for his next lecture. "You see . . . Well, his great-grandfather tired of being an Indian. And he became greedy, like all white men. The story is that he stirred up the white settlers against the remnants of his tribe, and they marched down on the camp one night. Wiped out every single Chinook—armed as they were with rifles against the Chinooks' handful of arrows. His squaw was killed. Some say Barradine's ancestor killed her himself, then snatched up their half-breed child at the last minute and took him along when he escaped. A last sentimental gesture, perhaps."

"And the curse?" I prodded. "Don't tell me the Chinooks caught up with him and took back the baby, after scalping . . .?"

My smile faded at the look on Al's face. She glanced at me queerly.

"No. I told you, they were all wiped out. Dead. Barradine's great-grandfather took his son to a distant city, after selling all the lands of his tribe for a tidy sum. He married again, a white girl. The boy was reared and educated as a wealthy white. He married and had two sons and a daughter. These in turn married. Two had children, and . . ."

"Yes, but the *curse!*" I demanded. "I don't see any just retribution in . . ."

"Oh, there was no idea of retribution," my friend said quietly. "It's just that Barradine's ancestor took the oath to become a Chinook . . . and all his children after him, and their children's children. So the—— Well, nobody knows why, but everyone of them died the same way on exactly the same date: the date of that attack on the Indian village, when everyone of the tribe except Barradine's ancestor and his half-breed son were wiped out by the whites!"

I stared. "You say—they all *died?* On the same day, years apart?"

"Every descendant of that Barradine who pledged himself to be a Chinook," Al said quietly. "On November the 19th, they all died. Some of them quite young, some older than Dr. Barradine—he's about 45. Furthermore, they all died . . . *the same way! Of concussion, caused by a crushed skull!*"

I ran my tongue over dry lips, glancing after Barradine's gaunt figure as he disappeared through the door. This, I decided, I must look into; not that I believed in "curses," but simply because I'm always hunting plots for weird stories. *Revenge . . . A ghostly tomahawk,* my mind ran, *striking in the dead of night . . .*

"They were accidental deaths?" I pursued. "Car wrecks; something like that? Or was murder ever proved?"

"*Nothing* was ever proved." Al shrugged, signalling for her check. "All those people were simply living along, happy and contented. Living normal lives, like you and me. Then, suddenly, they were found dead—in bed, at the breakfast table, at the theatre, almost anywhere. But the front of their heads were caved in, every single one of them! And now . . ."

I swallowed, nodding. "Now Barradine's afraid it's going to happen to him," I finished. "I wonder if he'd mind talking to me about it? I mean, is he sensitive on the subject?"

MY COMPANION shook her head. "Doesn't seem to be; he talked about it in class—although I noticed he became very nervous. His doctor advised him to talk about it, though, and study Indian lore. Try and reason himself out of it; laugh it off. I don't think he's having much luck, though," she added soberly. "Those headaches are getting worse. And each of his kinspeople had them. Horrible ones. Just before they . . ."

I grunted. "Well, as you say, it's queer. Pretty hard to laugh off all those— They couldn't have been anything more than a series of crazy coincidences! Death-wish stuff. Everyone of his kinsmen must have subconsciously *wanted* to die, to atone for what their ancestor did to those Indians who befriended him. So they——" I frowned suddenly, and shrugged. "I can understand how they'd let themselves get killed on exactly the same date. But why that particular way? With a crushed skull?"

Al shrugged, too. "Mind over matter; there you are!" she grinned. "Maybe their sense of family guilt affected the chemical structure of their bones! Or maybe—Oh, you figure it out!" She laughed and rose from the table.

"I certainly intend to," I announced. "Do you suppose dianetics would help that poor guy? You know—hygienic manipulation of the mind. It's the bright new word among us scientifiction fans now. What do you think of it?"

"All that stuff about psychic wounds? Like the case of the man who had mysterious choking spells, and found out they were caused by a sub-memory of the umbilical cord being wound around his neck before birth——" She laughed. "Nonsense! Pure nonsense."

"Maybe," I said. "And maybe not. But I think I'll talk to our friend Dr. Barradine just the same."

THIS resolution was not to be carried out that evening, however. A wire came from Barradine's publisher, calling him back to New York—something about the galley proofs of his new book. I was not to see him again for several months. Motoring through Washington with friends, I happened to notice a stone archway over a private drive that opened on the highway. The name on the cement inset was BARRADINE, and on impulse I decided to drop in on my fellow-lecturer.

Not wishing to bother him with strangers, I had my friends let me out at the huge wrought-iron gate. A long curving driveway of slag swept away through giant oaks and pines and maples that hid the house. Beyond the trees, in a flash of sparkling light, I caught a glimpse of the river. I glanced about the well-kept grounds, admiring the way a rather mid-Victorian iron deer seemed to burst from a coppice of red and yellow leaves. There was a formal-looking fountain, with water pouring from an urn held by a stately nymph. Here, I decided, former Barradines had made their home and spent a great deal of that money swindled by their ancestor from the Indians who had trusted him. Small wonder they all harbored a nagging sense of guilt!

Striding up the drive, I sighted the house at last, set well back from the highway among a small forest of towering trees ablaze with autumn color. I stepped up on the veranda and knocked with the brass knocker that sent hollow echoes resounding through the hall beyond. Instantly the door opened, and a liveried butler bowed me into the house, after I had given my name and reason for calling. With a gesture he ushered me into Barradine's library—a huge high-ceilinged room, all paneled oak and shelves of books. The room was also a museum of Indian relics—peace pipes, small totems, reed baskets with head-bands attached, bone fishhooks, and display after display of beautiful arrowheads, bows, and tomahawks.

Barradine himself rose as I entered, pushing himself up rather wearily from a big leather chair in front of the blazing fireplace. He was wearing a brocade dressing gown and handsomely-tooled slippers of Moroccan leather. His smooth black hair glistened in the firelight, but he looked even thinner and more dissipated than when I had last seen him. There was a highball glass in his hand, and I saw at once, somewhat regretting my impulse to drop in unexpectedly, that he was quite drunk—and trying very hard to get drunker. He bowed rakishly, waving me to a chair, his first expression of annoyance at my call giving way to a sudden look of almost pathetic gratitude.

"My dear girl! How are you?" he asked, in the clipped affected tones I remembered.

"Fine. Wonderful." I smiled at him. "Busy. And you?"

Barradine's mouth twitched sharply in that violent tic I had noticed before. He stiffened in his chair, passing a hand over his high straight forehead. The spasm of pain that distorted his face for an instant was gone again. He smiled back at me lightly.

"Oh—I do very well, considering these damned headaches. I've just received an advance copy of my new book. Like to see it?"

He lifted a small volume from a tabouret near his chair and handed it to me. I blinked and almost started at the title: CHINOOK. Skimming over the chapters, I found it to be the intimate life-picture of an Indian, living in a Chinookan village of a century and a half ago. I could see at a glance that the author had put a great deal of intensive research on this least known of all tribes, and that the principal character, Anabotaha, was a living, breathing person to him. It was almost as though, rather pitiably, John Barradine sought to resurrect on paper one of those Indian braves his ancestor had slaughtered so long ago. Guilt-complex, I decided, smiling in triumph that my guess to Al months ago had been right.

"Devil of a time writing that thing," Barradine commented. "No two authorities seem to agree about what the Chinooks were like. My great-grandmother's tribe, you know. They seem to have lived in permanent villages and kept slaves, unlike the Sioux and Cherokees. They hunted and fished—along here, as a matter of fact.

These very grounds may have been the site of my ancestor's village. That's a queer thought, isn't it?" Barradine rambled on, almost as though he tried to stave off silence.

"Yes," I agreed, wishing I could leave gracefully at once. "I—I've often stopped on a crowded street corner, and thought: 'Two centuries ago a naked Indian stood here where I'm standing—aiming a flint-tipped arrow at a wild turkey flying just there, where that taxi nearly ran into that freight truck—' " I broke off with a small laugh. "The Vanishing American. This is their country, you know. We stole it from them and shoved them into little cubbyholes called reservations. Serves us right that everything is so complicated now! They're happy and secure and as simple as ever, but we civilized whites are all going crazy!"

Barradine laughed, the first really free unforced laughter I had ever heard from his lips. He looked me over with an alert expression as though seeing me for the first time, and waved his hand at a crystal decanter beside me.

"Do stop sitting on the edge of that chair," he begged with sudden humility. "Lean back. Have a drink, and talk to me. Ye gods!" Again he passed a hand over his forehead, his brows contracting with pain. "You're the first person I've met who really knows what's the matter with me. The fact is," he blurted, "I'm in debt up to my neck—and two years behind on contracts I've signed for new books. I'm—" He flushed, then went on frankly: "I'm being sued for breach of promise by a show girl I—became involved with, and wanted to marry until I realized she was only after my 'fortune'! What I'd like to do," he said bitterly, "is chuck the whole mess and—and give it back to the Indians, as you mentioned! Ever felt that way? Get rid of every civilized responsibility! Go native!"

"Just about everybody in the country feels that way right now," I reminded him. "What with this third war coming up, and the Atom Threat hanging over us, and inflation. Yes, I've felt that way. Wanting to turn myself into an African native, or a Polynesian. Or lo, the poor Indian!"

My host nodded slowly, thoughtfully, rubbing one temple with long white fingers.

"Yes," he said quietly. "But it's worse with me. I *am* an Indian. *And they want me back!*" he muttered this as though to himself. *"I've wanted to go back, like all the rest of my family. But I've been afraid, because it—it has to be complete! It's not as if I'm a member of just any tribe. I am Chinook!"*

I GULPED, commenting grimly to myself that Dr. Barradine's mind was going at last. He had evidently, I guessed, cracked up under the strain of civilized living, debts, and a rather unhappy love affair. I had, of course, heard rumors about the show girl in Florida; some cheap little bar-fly Barradine had picked up in a night club in a moment of loneliness and bewilderment. Pity for the gaunt, middle-aged man swept over me—but that violent twitch of his taut mouth made me glance nervously toward the door. One could never tell what the breakdown cases were likely to do next; and after all, my friends were waiting for me impatiently out on the highway.

I rose and took my leave, as pleasantly as possible. Barradine followed me to the door himself; but suddenly, in the hall, he clapped both hands to his forehead and leaned heavily against the paneled wall.

I stepped to his side solicitously. "Can I get you anything? Call your servant?"

"No—no." He straightened, and stood aside for me to pass through the open door. "I'm all right now. It's just about this time of year, I . . . I . . . What is today anyhow? November the . . . 17th? I . . ."

He stopped short, the blood ebbing slowly from his face as he spied something on the veranda—something very odd, which had not been there when I entered, I was quite sure. As Barradine bent over and picked it up with a shaking hand, I stared at it curiously. Why, it was nothing but two small boards perhaps an inch thick, tied together at one end with a piece of dirty rawhide.

But Dr. Barradine whirled on me accusingly.

"You—?" he snapped. "Is this some kind

of horrible joke you thought up because of my . . .? You left this here for me to find! Yes! To drive me completely mad? I . . . I've heard of them, but I've never seen one!"

I blinked at him, backing toward the steps and deciding that my fellow-lecturer ought to be in a mental hospital. There was a look of such utter terror in his bulging eyes, and his mouth jerked hideously now with the nervous tic as he brandished those two innocent-looking rough boards at me.

"I . . . I haven't any idea what you mean," I said crisply. "But . . . you really ought to be under a doctor's care!" I made my voice as calm and soothing as possible, telling myself that if I ever got away from this sombre old house on the river, I would never again drop by alone to visit any interesting neurotics. "Call me sometime, won't you?" I gave Barradine my address in New York, and almost bolted down the drive, glancing back only one at that solitary figure still standing there in the doorway, those thong-tied boards clutched in his trembling hands.

You know the rest. No doubt you read of the case in the papers; certainly it was sensational enough to make headlines all over the country. I believe the tabloids even printed a picture of John Barradine, as his body was found by those two fishermen on the Columbia . . .

FLOATING downstream in that Indian canoe! Quite naked, too, except for a beaded breech-cloth and wampum strands about his neck and arms. His flesh had been stained a rich red-brown with some sort of berry juice, and his black hair had been clipped short and shaved off except for one savage bristle on top that stood up like a pony's mane. But there was no grimace of horror or of agony stamped on his dead face; only a look of ineffable peace.

As you know, the forepart of Barradine's skull was crushed in like an eggshell. The police arrested his butler, but later released him when he proved that his master had been left alone in that old mansion on the Columbia River the afternoon of his death. On November the 19th—like all the other members of his line who, as Barradine expressed it so oddly, "went back" because the tribe "wanted them back." How his skull became crushed in that horrible manner, and who placed his body in that Chinook funeral-canoe afterwards, was a matter of great mystery to the police. The dugout itself, crudely fashioned with a stone hammer and adz, was *new*—and yet no such Indian canoe has been seen on the Columbia River for over a hundred years!

Most puzzling of all were those two rough boards, so gruesomely tied down at one end like some savage torture-instrument over Barradine's mashed-in forehead. That, the police said, was quite obviously the work of a maniac, as brutal and meaningless as the Black Dahlia slaying.

But I have my own opinions. I think I know who made that Chinook funeral-canoe, like a man, mortally ill, building his own coffin. And I believe Barradine himself climbed into it and laid himself out, still alive, because he knew *when* it would come . . . and *why*. I believe he tied that contraption on his head, too, as a last ironic gesture of submission.

Those two boards, I learned later, had been dropped on the Barradine veranda by the butler, who had meant to put them in the fireplace. He had taken them from the gardener, who had thus innocently tied them together with an old bootlace to prop up a bit of broken shrubbery. They could not know, of course, that what he made was a Chinook head-flattener: an instrument tied on the head of a papoose at birth, in order to press down its soft skull-tissue in a slope level with the nose. Thereafter a Chinook's skull grew that way; not perpendicular, like a white man's forehead, but *flat*—forever setting apart all tribal members from anyone else on earth. Just so did the Chinese nobility break and bind the feet of their girl-children, or the Ubangi women insert wooden disks in their split lower lips.

I learned of this tribal custom when I read Barradine's book. There was another name for the now-extinct tribe of Chinook Indians. They were called *Flatheads*.

The Skull of Barnaby Shattuck

By Merle Constiner

I

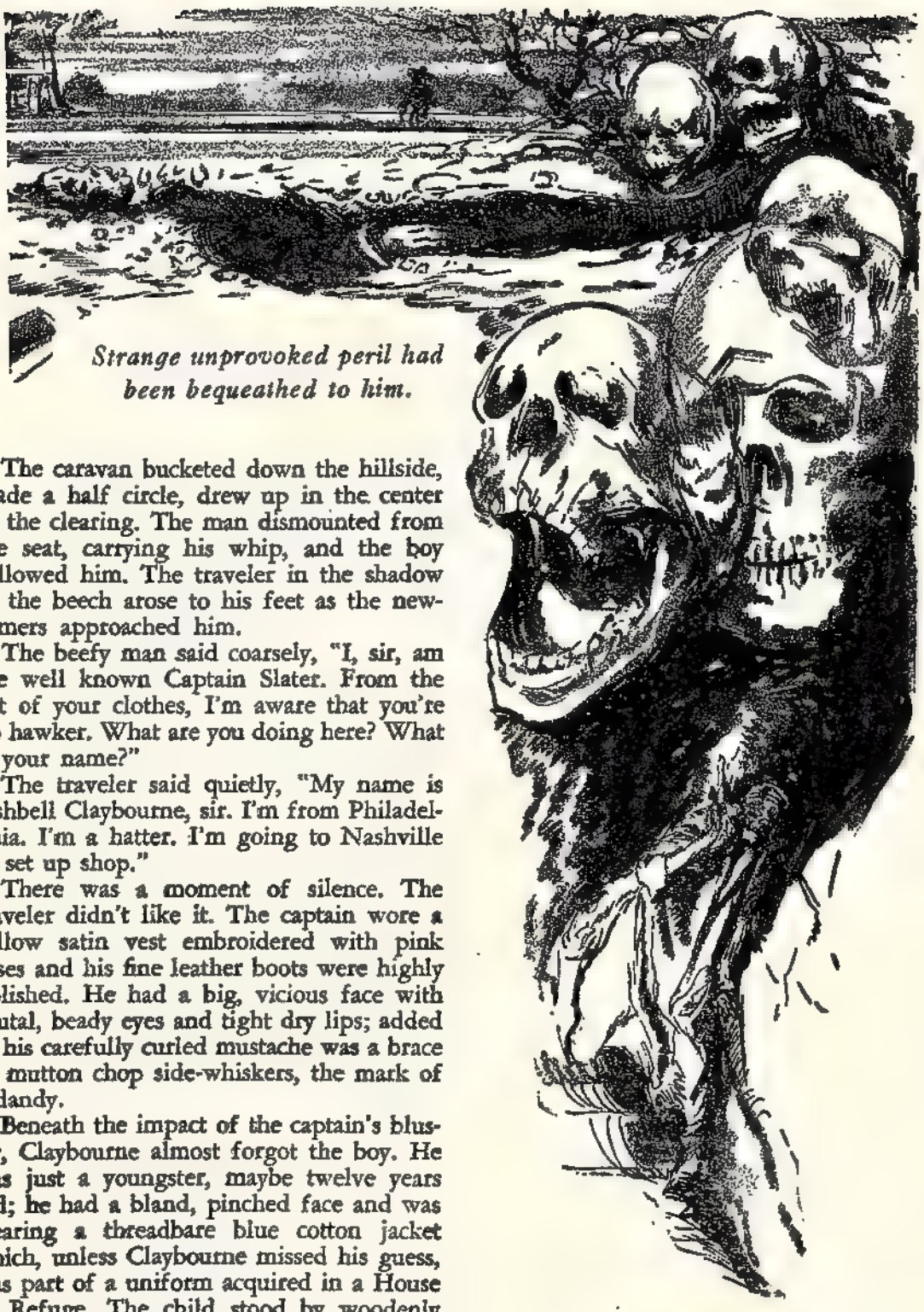
Dead Man's Gift

THE little hollow was in the bend of a creek, shrouded from the pike by a thicket of pawpaws. The traveler sat rigidly in the lonesome dusk, this May evening in 1852, thinking of his city home; about him, in the lush grass, were the charred remains of old fires which told him he had wandered into a deserted peddlers' camp. He was no longer a young man and endless walking, day after day, had proved hard going. He was glad to find this haven.

He was a slender man, slightly stooped, with a touch of silver in his flaming red hair. Methodically, he had prepared for the night. He'd cooked a meager meal, using his tinder-box and saving his friction matches, had shaved in the cold stream and beaten the dust from his cheap narrow-cloth clothes. Now, his back against a giant beech, he was listening to the whippoorwills. Waiting for darkness and slumber.

And then, with a crash of splintered brush, the wagon came rocking down the slope from the highway.

It was a small showman's caravan, with an enclosed houselike structure built up from the wheels. Bright in blue paint, with gold letters on the sides saying, CAPTAIN SLATER, LTD. There were two persons on the wagon-box, a boy and a beefy, mustachioed man. With one hand, the man held the reins in a fist against his chest—with the other he lashed the horse wildly.



Strange unprovoked peril had been bequeathed to him.

The caravan bucketed down the hillside, made a half circle, drew up in the center of the clearing. The man dismounted from the seat, carrying his whip, and the boy followed him. The traveler in the shadow of the beech arose to his feet as the newcomers approached him.

The beefy man said coarsely, "I, sir, am the well known Captain Slater. From the cut of your clothes, I'm aware that you're no hawker. What are you doing here? What is your name?"

The traveler said quietly, "My name is Ashbell Claybourne, sir. I'm from Philadelphia. I'm a hatter. I'm going to Nashville to set up shop."

There was a moment of silence. The traveler didn't like it. The captain wore a yellow satin vest embroidered with pink roses and his fine leather boots were highly polished. He had a big, vicious face with brutal, beady eyes and tight dry lips; added to his carefully curled mustache was a brace of mutton chop side-whiskers, the mark of a dandy.

Beneath the impact of the captain's bluster, Claybourne almost forgot the boy. He was just a youngster, maybe twelve years old; he had a bland, pinched face and was wearing a threadbare blue cotton jacket which, unless Claybourne missed his guess, was part of a uniform acquired in a House of Refuge. The child stood by woodenly as Captain Slater said arrogantly, "Mr. Claybourne, by your admission you are a tradesman—and not of the gentry of the road.

Heading by Vincent Napoli

You trespass here. I must ask you to leave."

"That I shall do," Claybourne answered good humoredly "—at daybreak."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the captain's gigantic head began to tremble; he was consumed by fury. In a deep, quivering voice he asked, "Do you love your God, sir?"

Claybourne nodded humbly. "Good!" the captain exclaimed, "For now I shall preach you a sermon!"

Quick as a cat, the big man hopped toward the boy. Before the child could dodge, he'd extracted a moneybag from the youngster's blouse. A small, pleated-leather purse. Slater opened it, counted the coins. "It's all here, just one hundred dollars even. Did you think, gamin, that you could pigeon me?"

The boy stared at the beefy man in cold silence.

The captain said heavily, "Claybourne, this is going to be good for the soul to watch. This young heflion has been apprenticed to me for three weeks. I've got him fair and square, with the papers to prove it, from a friend in Louisville. Ever since he's been serving me, he's given me trouble. I've been waiting all afternoon for this." He caught the boy by the wrist, bent his knee for balance, and laid the long cowhide whip in an arc on the grass for the fullest possible lash.

The boy's eyes went slatey hard. He said, "Cuffee! Don't do it!"

Claybourne stepped forward. He said, "Sorry, Captain, but there'll be no flogging here—nor anywhere else."

The captain turned his flushed face. "What's that, sir? You stay out of this."

"I happen to know a little law on this point," Claybourne said mildly. "You see, I was an apprentice once myself. Here are the facts—which you know as well as I do. A boy may be bound by indenture to servitude until he reaches his majority. You tell me you got him from a friend in Louisville. An apprentice cannot be assigned; that man alone is his master. And the law says a master cannot delegate another to chastise —his authority is a personal one."

The boy grinned wickedly.

WITHOUT a word, Captain Slater wheeled, strode to his caravan. An instant later, he was back. This time he carried a short, heavy quirt of braided horsehair. Suddenly, he struck.

And Claybourne, knowing that the blow was coming, was somehow unable to avoid it. The quirt caught the hatter across the forehead; a flash of unbearable pain burned through his body and he fell to the ground. The fury of the second stroke missed him as he lay on the turf, the third blow numbed his shoulder. The quirt was loaded with lead; he knew he was being deliberately beaten into insensibility.

Through a veil, the tradesman saw the captain's polished boots, heard his coarse voice speaking, "—this is my man-size whip, sir. This is the whip for meddlers. This is the whip with which I kill—"

And Ashbell Claybourne, the hatter from Philadelphia, made up his mind. He threw his body in a half turn on the rank swamp grass, drew his brand new traveling pistol from his waistband—and brought his attacker to sudden death. The ball struck the captain in that V of soft flesh beneath the chin, ranged upward into his brain.

Claybourne got to his feet. Methodically, he picked up the bullish body, carted it to the creek, laid it out of sight behind a clump of sumac.

When he returned to the clearing, the boy was feeding the horse. Purple shadows were gathering beneath the trees and Claybourne sat himself by the embers of the fire. The boy, finished with the mare, passed him by, disappeared into the foliage by the stream. He was gone a good quarter of an hour and it was dark when he returned.

Claybourne was sponging his cut with liniment when the youngster materialized at his side. Claybourne said gently, "I'm sorry I had to do it before you, son. What's your name?"

The boy shrugged. His pinched face was expressionless. "They call me Spence Kelty. And dead men don't worry me none, but don't call me son. I can't stand for folks to try to get on the good side of me. That always brings trouble and I can't abide trouble." He moved his arm, winced.

Claybourne said, "You're hurt, Spence. He hit you, too!"

The boy looked disgusted. "Of course he hit me. I caught the lick that gave you time to touch off that pocket-pistol of yours. It was the least I could do, wasn't it? You've got to drive Allurah."

"Allurah?"

"That's what I said—Allurah. She's the mare."

"Are you proposing that we take possession of Captain Slater's wagon. No, my friend. I'll kill in self-defense—but I won't steal. How you conduct your life is, of course, your own business. But I will not—"

"Well, how about this?" The boy argued desperately. "Captain Slater was headed for a place the other side of Corryville—where a family named Alcorn lives. He told me so. We'll take the caravan there, and leave Allurah with friends. What do you say to that? Corryville is on the Nashville road, you won't be going out of your way."

"Very well," Claybourne said at length. "But frankly, I don't relish the prospect."

THAT night, for Ashbell Claybourne, was a long and thoughtful one. He got the wagon up out of the hollow, onto the pike, and gave the mare her lead. He questioned the boy beside him on the wagon seat—and got evasive, worldly answers. This much he could piece together. Spence Kelty was an orphan who talked of bloody sailor fights along the Savannah waterfront, of the gin-houses of St. Louis, of prize fighters and footpads and cockfights. Before he dropped off to sleep on the hard plank, he had a question to ask, a pertinent question. He said, "Clay, you told Captain Slater that no one in this wide world had the right to flog me—"

"With one exception, Spence. Only your real master. The man in Louisville who holds the real papers on you."

The boy sighed happily. "It's too good to be true, I can hardly believe it. My master, the man you're talking about, is in jail. *And will be for twenty years!*

Rhythmically, monotonously, Allurah, the mare, laid her plodding hooves fetlock deep

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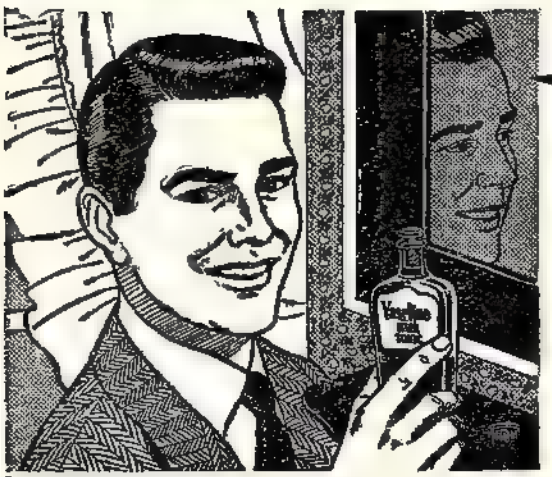

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into the soft dust. As the hours passed on, they left the forest for half-tilled farmland and the indigo sky paled in the east to a finger of pearl. Claybourne made camp for breakfast. All night he'd driven in fatalistic fear, listening behind him for the relentless pursuit of the law.

Leaving the sleeping boy on the wagon-box, he dismounted, made his way to the door-like tail gates at the rear. He was searching for food—and, too, he was curious to observe by what wares and snares Captain Slater, Ltd., found sustenance from the gullible countryside.

There was a wooden chest with bacon and meal, a canister of tea, a few pots and pans. That was all. The astonishing fact was that Slater's wagon was completely empty. Claybourne got a fire going, sliced a few rashers of bacon, made tea. Spence Kelty woke up and joined him.

The meal finished, Claybourne said, "Spence, I hate to do this—but I've got to put the facts before you. Foolishly, you've thrown your lot in with mine. And that means you're an accessory to murder. How long do you think it'll be before the high sheriff will be down on us?"

The boy thought this over. "I wouldn't worry about that."

"Of course you wouldn't. That's because you're young. Let me tell you, this is very grave. It won't be long before Slater's body is discovered. We're in possession of his caravan. Even a yokel can put two and two together. What do you say to that, sir? I suggest we part company this instant. I've pledged my word to drive the mare to Corryville, and that I'll do. I see no need, however, for you to be dragged into this."

Spence Kelty said calmly, "They'll find the captain—but they won't know him to look at him. I sheared off his whiskers and mustache, and shaved him. I did it last night while you were putting that liniment on your head. He sure seems a different man all clean-shaven—"

Claybourne blinked. "A dead man, you—?"

"It was first one I ever shaved." Spence began to brag.

Claybourne changed the subject. "I just looked in the wagon, Spence. It's empty. How did Slater make a living?"

"The wagon was just a sniggle—like rich folks live in a big brick house. Captain Slater had a golden tongue, he lived by his wits."

Claybourne remembered that hundred dollars. The answer didn't quite satisfy him. Spence said woodenly, "When we get to Corryville, and you turn Allurah over to those people, the Alcorns, they'll know you aren't Captain Slater. How you going to talk your way out of that?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. You leave that to me."

"I sure will. And, Clay, when I got through with it, I put it back."

"You put what back?"

"The razor. I got it out of your kit while you were taking him down to the creek!"

IT WAS mid-afternoon, about four miles out of Corryville, when they met the extraordinary Mr. Merryweather.

The blue caravan had just passed through a spit of woodland and was rolling around a bend in the turnpike when Claybourne saw him. He was a pudgy dumpling of a man sitting on a stile over a split-rail worm fence, in the shade of a gnarled cherry tree.

He was dressed in the height of metropolitan fashion, wasp-waisted bottle green Petersham coat, silken waistcoat and spotless white beaver hat. His jolly little face was drawn with dolor and his protruding eyes rolled in their sockets, left and right, as he surveyed the road. A big yellow carriage wheel with a broken spoke lay on the ground nearby.

Claybourne reined in the mare. The chubby little man leapt nimbly from his perch, placed the wheel in the rear of the wagon—and joined his benefactors on the seat. Claybourne asked, "Having a little difficulty, sir? Get up, Allurah."

Their guest settled himself comfortably. "Difficulty is putting it mildly. I'm Mr. Merryweather, gentlemen. Mr. Josiah Merryweather. Would you take me as far as the nearest town? I appear to need a wheelwright—"

The boy said frigidly, "This will cost you money. We're no stagecoach."

"Spence!" Claybourne flushed angrily. "The boy's joking, sir. We're delighted at the prospect of your company. Travel gets pretty monotonous. Just what happened, may I ask?"

"If I should tell you what happened, every detail, it would take a fortnight of steady talking. I've had trouble, gentlemen. Such trouble as this world hasn't seen since the Assyrian swept down like a wolf on the fold. I'm returning from a wedding."

Claybourne smiled. "Well, congratulations, sir."

"Accepted, with pleasure. Because it wasn't my wedding—just the nuptials of a friend."

Claybourne grinned. "I'm a bachelor myself. I know just what you mean."

"The wedding wound up last night, after a week of frivolity. I'm returning to my home in Nashville. My two 'tigers,' my little grooms, you know, over-ate and I had to leave them to recuperate. I'm no horseman myself and I started out alone. Then the trouble started. My chaise hit a stump in the road. The pipe I was smoking jerked out of my mouth. The chaise skidded into a ditch and turned turtle. When I extracted myself, I discovered that the pipe had set the upholstering on fire, I'd lost my hamper of food, and the left rear wheel had a broken spoke. Thus I bring upon myself the hymeneal wrath of Jove. Er, do you happen to have a spot of Madiera around?"

Claybourne shook his head regretfully.

Mr. Merryweather looked resigned. "Ah, the vicissitudes of wayfaring! I have so many adventures I really should keep a journal."

Abruptly, he leaned forward. "What is that I see? An inn. Well, bless my heart. Pull up, sir, pull up. Permit me to treat you and your young friend to a bit of lunch. It's not that I'm a drinking man—but spittle is gathering in my gullet."

IT WAS a small sturdy cabin of squared logs, neatly joined, and bore the name "Two Mile Tavern"; Claybourne hitched the mare out of the sun, at the side, and

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they entered. The place was clean and pleasant. The proprietor, a lanky fellow in homespun, was on a stool by the window, weaving a horsecollar from corn shucks. He arose, showed his guests to the table of honor, a slab timber bench by the fireplace. Spence Kelty sat on the low trestle, close to Ashbell.

Mr. Merryweather closed his eyes. He said, "Food. Wine." Moisture gathered at the corners of his jovial lips. "We'll have fowl—and whatever else you have on hand, my good host. Of course I'll have to feel the bottles. That's the way I select my drink, you know."

The countryman blinked. "They all feel the same. Hard and shiny. Bottles is made of glass, suh. Now I got a pottery jug of rye." He thought he was talking to a wealthy lunatic. "This jug, hit's rough. Hit's got more feel to it. Shall I bring it in?"

Mr. Merryweather explained crossly, "One feels the wine bottle for temperature, my good man."

"Oh, what's the use o' that? After the first tankard, it all tastes the same. The wine bin is in the kitchen, suh. If you'll kindly step back here—"

The meal was a succulent one and there was a general feeling of contentment in Captain Slater's caravan the last few miles into town. Mr. Merryweather made several paternal attempts to engage young Spence in conversation, which netted the gentleman nothing but a series of malevolent grunts. Claybourne, to relieve the tension, remarked, "I believe you said you live in Nashville, sir. We're headed in that direction. I understand it's a most hospitable town."

"A hospitable town filled with unfriendly persons—if you'll pardon the paradox." A sour memory flashed through his eyes and his face set in genteel annoyance. "I'm not a native of the city. They've got a way of insulting you right up to pistols and then stopping short of the danger-line. I was reared differently. Until recently I was quartered at the Truax House, a high-class but modest gentleman's retreat. Conditions got so bad I was forced to remove myself."

Claybourne cocked an eyebrow. "Wouldn't they let you feel the wine bottles?"

"This is no joking matter, I assure you." Mr. Merryweather's voice cracked with indignation. "I had to give up my room to a pauper from Mississippi, a man named J. R. Shattuck. Penniless, you know, but of an old family. That's the way they do things in Nashville—they don't care about the color of your money!"

"So they kicked you out?"

"When I saw how little they appreciated my presence, I left."

CORRYVILLE was a thriving, bustling community of perhaps eight hundred souls. It was at the crossroads of two stage lines and the settlement was prosperous and busy. A huddle of small shops and houses, pleasant tree-bordered streets and immaculate whitewashed picket fences. Claybourne stopped before the courthouse, in the square, and bid his guest farewell. Laboriously, Mr. Merryweather lowered his ample frame to the cobblestones. He went to the rear of the wagon, returned with his yellow carriage wheel. He said, "Many thanks for your courtesy. When you get to Nashville, look me up." He fumbled in his coat pocket, came out with a small twist of brown paper. "And this, sir," he said, addressing Spence, "is for you, Young Master Kelty. Molasses candy!"

"Look at my teeth," Spence retorted haughtily. He raised his lip. "See all that brown stuff? I hain't got no time for candy. I chaw tobacco!"

Claybourne accepted the gift. "Thank you, Mr. Merryweather, maybe we'll see you sometime at a wedding. Good-bye, sir."

The chubby man, wrestling the big wheel, disappeared in the crowd.

For a long moment, Claybourne sighted along the reins at the horse's rumps. The setting sun played in the hatter's wild red hair, glazed his thin face with a harsh light. He said, "Spence, get down and go to an apothecary's. Buy a quart of gas-tar and a pinch of ochre. And get back here in a hurry. We've no time to lose!"

The boy nodded. "All right, Clay. But where will I get the money?"

"Not from me. You filched the captain's purse when you shaved him, didn't you?"

Spence said sullenly, "I don't recollect. Yes, I b'lieve I did. You see, the way I figgered—"

"I know. Well, the captain got us into this—he'll have to get us out. Now be quick about it!" He paused. "And get directions on that Alcorn house. We're nearly there."

A QUARTER of a mile from town, Claybourne drove off the highway into a gully.

He mixed the ochre with the gas-tar and the result was a thickish green paint. Using his handkerchief as a sponge, he went over the caravan body from stem to stern, obliterating Captain Slater's name, bringing the wagon to a glossy emerald hue.

The boy was puzzled. "Clay, why you painting—?"

"An effort to prolong our lives, my boy." Claybourne was grim. "I suspect there was something about that blue caravan, and Captain Slater, Ltd., that impelled Mr. Merryweather to make his murderous attack on us."

The boy, unmoved, listened attentively. Claybourne said, "He was waiting for us with that wheel. Not for a ride—but for us. Waiting to kill us. Frankly, I didn't suspect him until he gave you the molasses candy. Remember he called you Young Master Kelty. During his trip with us, I didn't address you as anything other than *Spence*. Yes, no two ways about it. He knew a lad named Spence Kelty was to be found in Slater's wagon."

"Was he after me?" The boy considered. "The captain made a lot of enemies but I never saw him before—!"

"He thought I was the captain. He was after all of us. There's a white powder, too, in the tea canister. That's for me. There's a white powder in Allurah's oats. He tried to wipe us all out!"

The boy's face went bleak. "How did he do it? Allurah's oats, and the tea, is in the wagon. He was in sight every minute."

"But was he?" Claybourne asked gravely. "Remember the inn, and that foolishness about the wine? The whole thing was a sly ruse. He simply left the tavern by the kitchen, got to the wagon, did his deadly work, and returned. While we sat blissfully at the table."

"But why?"

"I don't know. However, I intend to find out. Recall that he dragged in a man, a certain J. R. Shattuck, in Nashville, at the Truax House? Right now I don't know why—but I'll find that out, too. Merryweather, if that's his name, brought up this Shattuck as a second string to his bow. If we dodged the poison, which we did, Shattuck is supposed to finish the job."

"Then why go to Nashville, Clay?"

Claybourne said softly. I've come all the way from Philadelphia. I make good hats. The gentlemen in Nashville, I've heard, like the best in headwear. I'm going to set up shop there. And Captain Slater, or Mr. Merryweather, or Mr. J. R. Shattuck will not prevent me."

A FULL moon was climbing the violet sky, above the young hickories on the hillcrest, when the wagon turned in from the highway, past the lacy blackness of the fence-line cedars—into the Alcorn lane. Many times Claybourne had thought about this place, wondered about it, and now when he'd finally reached it, his bewilderment was all the greater. In the sweet scented spring night there was an air about the two-story frame farmhouse of good honest living, of quiet respectability. He couldn't visualize Captain Slater in this honorable setting.

Candlelight was shining from an upstairs bedroom.

Claybourne walked the mare in a small court at the back, between a milkhouse and a woodshed. He unharnessed her, watered her, and secured her with her head to the trough. "Now," he said to his young companion, "we'll see what is what. And I'm to do the talking."

The boy nodded dourly.

They stood in the shadows by the kitchen door. Claybourne knocked. After an interval, they heard sounds from within, and the door opened. A goblin-faced, wizened little man in a patched nightshirt held a beeswax candle above his head, caught them in the disc of its flame. Claybourne liked him the

second he laid eyes on him. The little man in the nightshirt screwed up his face, said gruffly, "Well, come in! I can't be leaving this door open, you know. Letting all that unhealthy night-air into the house. Step lively, boys."

They followed him inside; he shut the door, lighted a tin petticoat lamp on the mantel shelf from the wick of his candle. The kitchen was large, well equipped, but somehow lonely, abandoned looking. There were filaments of cobwebs on the blackened ceiling beams. Claybourne said, "We've taken the liberty of leaving our mare in your barn lot. We're heading for California. My son, here, has the white misery in his left leg and daren't sleep on the ground. We'd like to rent the use of your fireplace to cook our supper, and a corner of your kitchen floor to spend the night. We understand such procedure is customary and—"

"So you're 'flitters', eh." The gnomish little man inspected them with twinkling eyes. "Emigrants to Californy! I'll have to talk it over with Randy. Master's away just now; Randy's in charge."

"Who," Claybourne asked, "is Randy?"

"I'm Randy. And Randy says yes." He began to fuss about the table. "No need for you to cook up anything. I get mighty tired livin' alone this a-way. I cook double. I cook for when master comes back." He laid out ham hock and poke salad, black-eyed peas and biscuits, a big blue pitcher of buttermilk. Claybourne and the boy ate in polite silence; when they had finished, Claybourne said intimately, "I'm sorry Mr. Alcorn isn't at home. They tell me in Corryville that he's a mighty fine gentleman."

"He's all I got—and I'm all he's got. I shore wisht he'd kissed them sinful fleshpots in Nashville good-bye and come back to ole Randy."

Claybourne said vaguely, "Youth will have its fling." The hatter was inherently religious and the words were gall on his tongue—but they brought results.

The elfish little man began to argue. "But that ain't like Master Steve Alcorn. He was allus a serious, hard-working lad. Now he's in Nashville a-throwin' his pappy's money around like hit was water."

"What's his pappy say to that? I'll bet he didn't like it."

"His pappy's gone to a better world. Passed away last winter. Heiring the farm and all to Steve. Ever'thing was all right until this packer come!"

"Packer?"

"Yep. One of them bajulating peddlers that totes needles and ribbands and small wares around on his back. Iff'n I had my way wouldn't nare one be allowed in no house o' mine!"

"What about this packer? Did he have mutton-chop whiskers and a black mustachio?"

"Nope. I mind the night he came, six weeks ago. It was about nine o'clock in the evening. Steve was sitting here in the kitchen, a-broodin'. The earth hadn't hardly dried out on his pappy's mound and he was mighty lonesome and low in sperit.

"There was a knock on the door and I let this feller in. He was about the meanest critter I ever see—and I'm hard to scare. He was dressed in nice brown clothes, and boots, but he wore 'em like a animal. Friends, I never seen sech power in a human. Not brain-power but bull strength. He was medium tall with arms like singletrees and a chest like a kag o' nails. It was his face, though, that put fear into me. He didn't have no neck, he was as bald as an egg, and his eyes were so frosty white you could hardly see the pupils."

SPENCE KELTY shifted nervously; even Claybourne felt a chill go up his back.

Randy said, "That's about the whole story. I went to bed. Steve and this packer talked till about three in the morning. All next day Steve was silly talkin', like a gal. He said he was goin' to Nashville for a short trip. He borrowed on the farm, drawed his pappy's money from the Corryville bank—and that was the last I seen of him."

"How much cash did he take to Nashville with him?"

"That's a mighty pussonal question but I'll answer it. I'd say around five-six thousand dollars."

"Has he written you?"

"It wouldn't do no good. I cain't read nohow."

Claybourne said casually, "Captain Slater sent us."

Old Randy looked surprised.

"You never heard of him?"

"Never in my life!" The old man was obviously telling the truth.

Claybourne was confused. He said, "We certainly appreciate your hospitality and we won't keep you up any longer. Goodnight, sir."

The old man shielded the wax candle with his cupped hand and left the room; they heard the stairs creak as he ascended to his chamber.

Claybourne extinguished the lamp. They took off their boots, loosened their clothes, and stretched out in a corner on the flagstone floor. The more Claybourne thought about it, the more befuddled he became. He questioned the boy closely. Captain Slater had said that he was going to visit the Alcorns, near Corryville. The child was definite on that point. Maybe there was a clan of Alcorns hereabouts, maybe they'd come to the wrong house. The clock on the mantel struck nine.

Moonlight came through the window, laid itself in china-blue panels along the stone floor. Claybourne heard the soft breathing of the boy beside him; Spence Kelty was asleep. And after a bit, Claybourne, too, dozed.

A hand was shaking his shoulder. He tried to waken but fatigue had drugged him. With a great effort, he opened his eyes, sat up. The lamp on the mantel was lighted again. And the clock beside it said four minutes after two; he'd slept five hours. He said hazily, "What is it, Randy, what's wrong?"

But the man bending over him was not the old caretaker.

It was a man in brown clothes, an apish, muscular man with a chest like a keg of nails. A man with a lumpy, bald head—and frosty, colorless eyes.

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II

Professor of Bones and Skulls

THE man said roughly, "Slater, get up. It's me, Benajah. Everything's ready. I'm leaving now. From here on in, it's up to you. I've even hitched up your wagon for you and got the mare waiting."

A glance showed Claybourne that Spence was dead to the world, which was as he wanted it. He put on his boots, got to his feet. He said curtly, "Lower your voice. We don't want to wake the child?"

The bald-headed man grinned in appreciation. "I've heard a lot about you, Captain. They say you're mighty crafty. Think of using a boy in this business! Ha-ha, an apprentice magsman." A foul odor came from his breath as he spoke. He picked up the lamp. "Come with me."

Benajah the Packer walked with the sluggish rolling gait of a sea-beast. Claybourne followed him out into the hall, turned with him into the dining room.

The dining-room furniture, all of good quality, had been pulled against the wall. A row of family portraits looked sternly down on them through the murk. Heaped in the center of the floor were bed linens, silver plate, jewelry, small rugs, rolled and tied. Benajah the Packer said gloatingly, "The place is a gold mine. Who'd ever ha' thought it! The Alcorns musta been mighty fancy people in the old days. That silver is sterling. And them rugs is genuwine Persian."

Claybourne asked suavely, "Where's old Randy?"

"Jest where he's s'posed to be." The apish man rubbed his jaw with a stubby, calloused hand. "My mount's down the lane. I'll be getting on. You know your orders. You take this stuff on into Nashville to the coffee house. In Mockingbird Court. You ask for Frenchy Bouchelle. I'll be seeing you again, friend."

"At a wedding, mayhap?"

"What say?"

"Think nothing of it. Just an experiment. And unsuccessful. Yes, you're quite right. We'll no doubt meet again."

After Benajah the Packer had left, Claybourne stood at the window, watching the deep-chested man ride hell for leather out of the mouth of the lane and down the pike.

Once more, Claybourne inspected the heap of swag. After a moment's indecision, he found something that satisfied him: a cumbersome gold watch, engraved with a coat of arms and the word "Alcorn." Wrathfully, he dropped it into his pocket.

Room by room he searched the house.

Of the three bedrooms upstairs only one showed evidence of occupancy. Old Randy's shabby workclothes hung from a peg on the wall. There was a small, corded bedframe in the corner, bare of bedclothes. A mound of fluffy ashes lay in the fireplace, where a grass mattress had been burned, a tatter of blood-stain cloth smouldered on the hearth.

NOWHERE, downstairs or upstairs, was there any sign of the old man.

Claybourne returned to the kitchen, awakened Spence. Grimly, with no word of explanation, he led him from the house.

It was just outside the door that he made the grisly discovery. The foundation of the building extended about two feet above the ground; a few hours ago, when they'd entered, this foundation had been of field-stone. Now it was stucco, wet, new stucco.

Now, too, Claybourne knew about old Randy. Benajah the Packer had killed him in his bed, had placed his body within the foundation of the house. Had covered over his handiwork with a fresh coat of stucco. These killers, whoever they were, paid attention to detail.

He backed the mare out of the barn lot, turned her into the lane. Spence had hardly awakened; already he was asleep on the wagon-seat. For Claybourne it was to be another hard, troubled night. Things had started bad and were getting worse. Young Steve Alcorn was dead—of that, Claybourne was convinced. Young Steve Alcorn, the new heir, without immediate family. With only old Randy. And now Randy, too, was dead. Yes, these killers worked carefully and ruthlessly. They'd sealed their secret with two murders. They were wolfishly greedy. They missed no crumb of profit.

They'd taken young Alcorn's inheritance—and had returned for his family plate.

THE sun was at noon the following day when Claybourne and his companion reached the city of Nashville.

For two nights, the Philadelphian had gone with little sleep; the weariness that was on him was almost unbearable. Despite this, so hungry were his eyes for a view of the town, that he drove the wagon back and forth through the busy streets, for an hour or more, feasting his sight on his new home. Up Market, they went, weaving in and out of a shifting restless net of ramshackle sulkeys, bandbox phaetons and gigs, mud-caked buggies. They saw the great square, and the river landing. They idled along the fine streets, Church and Cedar and Summer, and the smoke of kitchen fires, and of the elegant boats on the river, rose not straight upward to the sky, but because of the basin, lay level along the rooftops, dipping from the chimney pots into the narrow side streets.

And Ashbell Claybourne knew that he had chosen wisely. That this town was truly for him.

There was a little inn in South Field, well beyond the high prices and hullabaloo of the business section, which exactly suited their needs. A boarding house known simply as "Mr. Hufford's." It was a rambling old clapboard home, deep in a grove of magnolias, and the element that appealed to Claybourne was a comfortable-looking stable—Allurah would be well cared for.

They engaged lodging, were led by a pimpled youth about Spence's age down a warren of halls, up a flight of stairs—to their quarters.

The two rooms, connected by an inner door, were pleasant, airy. Each had a cheap glass window, Spence's giving out onto the side yard, Claybourne's looking over a sloping roof to a stable at the rear. The pimple-faced urchin said swaggeringly, "I hope you enjoy your stay. Don't beller, don't sing. And go firing off no pistols—these walls are thin. Make a commotion and I'll have to come up and put you out."

Claybourne said diplomatically, "Son, tell Mr. Hufford we're very well pleased. And ask him to send up supper about seven. Now I'm going to retire. We've been on the road and I'm a little fatigued."

Spence looked astonished. "Going to bed now! Why we just got here. I ain't tired—and I been right along with you."

The pimple-faced boy said condescendingly, "Old men gits played out easier than healthy young boys. I'm off work in five minutes. Would you like I should show you the sights?" He put a conspiratorial slur into his voice.

Spence said, "Why not?" Claybourne remembered that his ward was carrying Captain Slater's worldly assets; he said, "Have you got anything you'd like to leave here with me? Say a valuable object that you picked up along the journey?"

Spence said archly, "I don't have no idee what you mean, Mr. Claybourne, but you'll find it in the other room, under the bed cover." The boarding-house boy perked up; Spence smiled dryly, "It's his rabbit-foot charm. You'd think it was worth a hunnert dollars, the way he keeps worryin' about it!"

IT WAS dusk-dark when the supper tray was brought in; Claybourne placed it on the desk, washed and shaved. The nap had completely refreshed him. He pulled up a cane-bottomed chair and ate with relish, scrupulously saving half of every portion for Spence. By the time he'd finished the boy had not yet come back, so he covered the dishes, to keep off the swarming flies—and went down into the town.

Now, in the twilight, the charm of the city touched even more deeply than before. Birds in the red oaks were chirping their lively vesperals, pungent syringa and honeysuckle came to him from the brick-walled gardens. A passerby directed him to the Truax House.

The mysterious Mr. J. R. Shattuck lived at the Truax House. And Mr. Shattuck was the lure, the alternative, that Merryweather had so deftly introduced into the situation. The logic seemed simple to Claybourne's systematic mind. First of all, he must do away with that peril that hung over him, the strange, unprovoked peril that Captain

Slater had bequeathed him. He must spring whatever snare that Merryweather had set for him; he must talk with this planter from Mississippi.

The Truax House was a narrow-fronted forbidding brownstone structure that sat directly up to the sidewalk, on Cherry —— in a sedate and painfully dignified neighborhood. Its street window was grilled with an ornate grating of wrought arrows and acanthus leaves. Claybourne crossed the tile foyer, turned the big brass doorknob. He'd hardly stepped over the threshold into the gloomy lobby, when a sharp-eyed attendant apprehended him. He wore the garb of a tradesman, and tradesmen were lepers in the sight of the management. He explained glibly that he owed some money to a man named Shattuck. That did it. He was hustled up the Italian carved marble staircase, and deposited before a massive door, and abandoned.

He knocked. A moment later, the door swung open on its baroque filigree hinges.

Mr. J. R. Shattuck was as drunk as a lord —but drunk or sober, he, too, could spot a tradesman. The planter was a bent, elderly man in rumpled linen. He had a withered, sunburned face. A big horsey nose. Piercing, little black eyes. He attempted to assume a military posture, said arrogantly, "I do not receive journeymen in my living quarters—"

CLAYBOURNE said, "Mr. Merryweather sent me."

"I'm not acquainted with a person by that name. Please go away."

"Captain Slater?" Claybourne tried again.

"Never heard of him."

Claybourne sought around in his mind, attempted to locate a known fact that could be used as an opening wedge. Merryweather had mentioned this man, that indicated he was connected in some way with the riddle. He was a Mississippian—yet he was here, just at this time. A strange coincidence indeed. The hatter said amiably, "The actual purpose of my visit, sir is to inform you that I have accidentally stumbled on the secret of your presence in Nashville. I've ferreted out your purpose—and am fast learning your methods." It was a good speech—and meant absolutely nothing.

Mr. Shattuck gnawed his lip; his eyes flicked furtively, as though he were under a sudden strain. He said, "Come in, sir. I'm far from home, and lonesome. I'd like the pleasure of your company."

Claybourne bowed gallantly, and they entered a small gentleman's sitting room appointed in the best Mayfair tradition.

Mr. Shattuck produced two footed goblets of beaten silver, a bottle of whiskey, and a bowl of shaved ice. He twisted two sprigs of mint, painstakingly, as though he were darning a stocking. He handed a goblet to Claybourne, took a deep draught, said, "Ah-aha-ah! So you know about Barnaby?"

The icy lamplight fell on the elegance of the room, on the humble hatter with his unkempt red hair, his dusty travel-worn jacket.

He was fighting for his life—and he knew it. For his life and other innocent lives. Nothing made any sense but this was serious business. He said, "That is why I'm here. I've come to find out about Barnaby."

The planter hiccoughed politely. "If you locate him, you'll be a better man than I am. I've been working on it for three weeks and am completely baffled." He narrowed his pouchy, triangular eyes. "I'm a man in very modest circumstances. I can offer no reward. But I'd greatly appreciate any assistance you might—"

"Let's go about this in an orderly manner. Just what's your interest in Barnaby?"

"We're distant kin. He was the son of a second cousin of mine. Thus I'm naturally concerned over his welfare. He's vanished here in Nashville and I fear foul play."

Claybourne looked sympathetic. The planter continued, "Barnaby Shattuck and I have adjoining plantations down in Mississippi. Small ones, you understand, and Barnaby's is much better land. If nothing has happened to him, if he's simply moved out of the state, I'd like to purchase it."

"Do you have the money?"

The man in rumpled linen shook his head. "No, I don't. But I'm certain we could work out long-time terms of some sort. Down in Mississippi blood is thicker than water. Dammit! Where can he be?"

Claybourne said, "Now, we're making headway. I know what brings you to town. What brought Barnaby to Nashville?"

MR. J. R. SHATTUCK said enviously, "About a month ago Barnaby's mother died, his father's been gone for a decade, Barnaby's mother was an iron-willed woman and she managed the place herself. Barnaby was—well, pampered. When Miss Melinda passed away, she naturally willed the land to her son. Do you know what he did?"

"Yes, I think I do. He drew out his bank account, borrowed heavily on the plantation —and came here, to Nashville."

The planter said thinly, "So you're not fourflushing. So you do know something. That's precisely what he did. How'd you find out?"

"An old man named Randy told me all about it. What then?"

"A few days after he'd left, I got a letter from the poor boy saying that he'd fallen into a mighty good thing. That he was going to buy a piece of property here. I got the definite impression that it was more farm land. And then it was a money-maker."

"I bet you rejoiced at his good fortune!"

"Of course I did! We Shattucks are one big happy family. When I heard no further from him, I began to wonder. Then I began to fear. I caught a stage north. I've been here for a week, searching for him."

"Dead or alive, you want that land of his, don't you?"

"I hope the poor boy's alive, of course. But the bank back home, the people that hold the mortgage, won't deal with me until I bring them some communication."

"I see." Claybourne pondered. "Did you ever see a packer down in your parts, a bald-headed peddler named Benajah?"

"You don't mean peddler, you mean cotton-buyer. I knew him only to speak to. He spent several days at the big-house with Barnaby. Just after Miss' Melinda's demise. Barnaby was pretty low and he liked company. As I understand it, the bald-headed man came north with him, on the same stage."

"Very likely. By the way, has there been a burglary at Barnaby's home since he's been away?"

"No."

"Are you certain?"

"Of course I'm certain." Mr. J. R. Shattuck spread his blue-veined hands. "He's vanished into thin air. I've walked the streets, asked for him in a hundred shops, even put a big six dollar appeal to him in the paper. You know what I think? I'm beginning to doubt if he ever came here in the first place."

Claybourne seemed skeptical. "What gives you that idea?"

"I've inquired at the coach-office downtown. The coachmaster checks the stages as they come in. They tell me he's known for his accurate memory. He's certain that no one of Barnaby's description came in on the stage from the Natchez Trace. He said he remembered the baldheaded man though."

Claybourne said, "To come back to a remark of mine earlier in the conversation. Out in the hall, I mentioned a Mr. Merryweather. A little fat jolly fellow. He claims that he had your quarters here, that he was ejected on your arrival. Is that true?"

"Absurd. By the way, should I wish to get in touch with you—where might I locate you?"

"Tonight I'm visiting with a friend. Tomorrow night I'll be at *Hufford's* boarding-house." He arose. "I have a feeling that justice is going to be served, sir."

"I hope so," the planter said vigorously. "I do, indeed!"

MOCKINGBIRD COURT was a squalid, rat-infested alley not far from the waterfront. Against the luminous sky, Claybourne could see the low houses, slut-tish and ominous, built in blocks of threes and fours, like dog pens. The dwellings were black, curtained against the passerby, but the hatter could hear the muffled minors of a fiddle, and voices raised in brutish frolic. Underfoot the road was rutted and treacherous.

The coffee-house was a small brick building, relic of a much earlier day, and boasted one high window of bubbled glass; faint

moonbeams touched its battered face and Claybourne could make out crude letters:

BOUCHELLE

He grasped the cold iron latch, swung the door inward—and entered.

The coffee-room was well lighted. There were sturdy tables and chairs, a rough counter behind which sat a keg of rye whiskey, a pitcher, and a rack of mugs. A half dozen rivermen loafed about the room, talking their trade, arguing. Hardcase customers, all of them, unshaven and violent. No one paid the slightest attention to the visitor as he closed the door. A stocky man in square, steel-rimmed glasses, and with a spotless white apron tied beneath his armpits, lolled against a doorjamb at the rear. This, Claybourne decided, must be Bouchelle.

And just beyond the bar, at a table in the corner, was Benajah the Packer.

The baldheaded man was watching him, waiting for him.

Claybourne strolled over and joined him. The apish killer was drinking Creole coffee and munching a horn of sugared pastry. He hunched his big, animal shoulders, said under his breath, "Get up from that chair. Don't be a-settin' here with me. Go back and talk to Bouchelle!"

Hiding his action as much as possible with his body, Claybourne took out the cumbersome gold watch and laid it on the table. Benajah the Packer said, "What you doin'? What's that?"

Claybourne said, "Benajah, when you came back from Mississippi with Barnaby Shattuck he disappeared en route. You hove into town on the stage but your victim wasn't with you. Did you do away with him in some inn on the way?"

Benajah sneered. "And you're supposed to be so smart. No, Slater, I didn't do away with him. We hadn't fleeced him yet. He got off at Cockrill Spring, out on the southeast fringe o' town. We always like 'em to come in alone."

"Where is he now?"

The packer's flashy cheeks contorted in sudden rage. "What you asking me these questions for? If you don't know the answers, you ain't supposed to! What you doin' here, anyway, talkin' to me? Your business is with Bouchelle. Where's the stuff?"

Claybourne said loudly, "How do I know you didn't steal it?"

The killer said tightly through drawn lips, "Speak soft, cob, when you say that word in here. What you mean? How do you know I didn't steal what?"

A velvety voice at their shoulder said, "May I take your order, sir? Are you two gentlemen in some difficulty?"

The man in the white apron bent over the table, peered timidly at them through his thick-lensed glasses. There was a servile lilt to his words. Claybourne asked, "Are you Mr. Bouchelle?"

"I am, sir."

Claybourne noticed that the Frenchman's ears were cropped, and that a slender glistening scar, like a fine silver wire, ran from the edge of his jaw down across his gullet. The hatter said aggressively, "This man—" he pointed haughtily at the peddler, "is attempting to sell me this watch. It's a good watch, and I'd like to buy it. But how do I know it isn't stolen. It's engraved with a coat-of-arms and the name *Alcorn*. Is this man a regular customer of yours? Is his name Alcorn?"

Benajah seethed in bullish rage. "Listen, Frenchy, I don't know—"

Bouchelle said softly. "We go to the office, all three of us. There we can make everybody very happy. Come."

THEY walked through a doorway at the rear of the barroom, passed through the curtained archway into a frugal bedroom.

Here, Bouchelle picked up a saucer-shaped pottery cruise filled with rancid fat, struck a friction match and lighted the floating linen wick. He pushed a chipped chiffonier from the wall, revealed a second small door, perhaps four feet tall and set about eight inches above the floor. The Frenchman said, "Go. Down into the office. I follow."

Claybourne lowered himself through the aperture, came out on a landing. A flight

of timber steps led down into the blackness below. The three men descended.

Bouchelle laid his primitive lamp on a barrelhead, said, "Benajah, what does this mean?"

"This cob is Captain Slater," the packer said viciously. "He's running a rig on us. I turned the loot over to him last night at Carryville—"

They were in a dank, stone-walled cellar. Bouchelle smiled seraphically. "He's not Slater, not by a damned sight. I know. I've never seen this man before. What's your answer to that, Benajah?"

The big killer was uneasy; sweat stood out on his gleaming brow. Desperate, he began to lie. "I ain't sayin' he's Slater—I'm tellin' you he's a friend of Slater's, a friend—"

"I see." Bouchelle nodded. "And, according to you, you turned the Alcorn stuff over to this friend, this stranger. Your orders were to save it for the captain. But you knew best. You—"

"No. No, I didn't." The peddler tried a different tack. "Slater's got it. Everything's all right. Just wait. The stuff'll be here by morning!"

"By morning you'll be long-gone!" Bouchelle took off his glasses, laid them carefully on the stairstep. "How came you by that gold watch, Benajah? Could it be that you're sorting out the choice pieces for yourself, before we get to them? I know of someone who will be very interested in hearing of this." The Frenchman addressed Claybourne. "What brings you here?"

"I'm a hatter, from Philadelphia. I've been traveling and my funds are low. I thought mayhap you could use my services."

"Ho! So you came to my coffee-house to sell me a hat?"

"I came to offer you my services," Claybourne said calmly. "I can do other things. I'm a good plasterer. Give me a little stucco and a corpse—and I can conceal it in the foundation of a house."

The lamp on the barrelhead flickered and spluttered. There was a moment of harsh silence.

Bouchelle took off his apron, his shirt, and his singlet. Abruptly, stripped to the waist, and without his spectacles, he seemed a different man. The lampglow played across the golden smoothness of his shoulders, highlighted his bunched, feline biceps. He took three steps toward the packer, said regretfully, "And now it's stucco and hidden corpses. Where did he learn that? You talk too much, Benajah."

The baldheaded peddler grinned in terror. "You stay 'way from me, Bouchelle!"

The Frenchman laid a gentle hand on the packer's forearm. The peddler went frantic under Bouchelle's touch, as though he were a ghastly and loathsome thing. He thrust out both arms against the Frenchman's chest, pistonlike, wildly, and his opponent catapulted backwards, half across the room.

Again Bouchelle came forward. Again and again, and always, Claybourne realized, his eyes were fastened unswervingly on the peddler's throat.

And finally, when he caught his man in the proper position, he struck. A sharp, swift blow, just below the chin. And Ben-

ajah the Packer dropped gasping to the floor.

Bouchelle said mildly, "That's better."

He then did a strange thing. He walked to the stairs, picked up his spectacles and fitted them on his nose. "My eyes are weak," he apologized. "To be accurate, one must see what one does." He took a short, hooked knife from his belt, bent over the unconscious peddler.

Naked to the waist, and in his steel-rimmed glasses, he was a grisly sight. As he stooped downward in the fluttering lamplight, Claybourne turned his head aside, climbed the stairs. Before he'd reached the bedroom, he heard the thrashing body of the dying packer.

A moment later, once again wearing his shirt and apron, Bouchelle joined him. The Frenchman said, "But for you, much misfortune might have fallen on us. Once more, please, how did you happen to come here?"

"Oh, no you don't, my friend." Claybourne smiled sourly. "I've just had a lesson from you in loose talk. I'll discuss that point further, when I'm surer of our relationship!"

The Frenchman opened his mouth in a soundless laugh. "I see your point. Come back in a few days—we may have room for you. Where are you putting up?"

"I'm with a friend tonight, tomorrow I'll be at Hufford's boarding-house, out on Darden Street." Claybourne cocked his eyebrow slyly. "Is it a profitable enterprise? How many have there been? Steve Alcorn and Barnaby Shattuck—who else?"

Bouchelle showed sudden respect. "You are well informed, sir. Ask no questions, do as you're told—and stay away from Joslyn Hall."

THERE was a stage-stop at Cockrill Spring, out on the fringe of town, as Benajah had said. A small grogshop in a cluster of modest dwellings. The sign on the iron bracket read, *BLUE GOOSE.* Claybourne entered, found an apple-cheeked barmaid sorting ginseng on the counter. She gave him a pleasant smile; he said, "I want you to try to recall a man for me. Several weeks ago this chap came in from the Trace. Do you think you could—"

"Maybe. You get so you watch passengers pretty careful—if you want to stay in business. What did he look like?"

Claybourne said, "That I don't know. He was youngish. But I can describe his traveling companion. This other man big and lumpy, he was baldheaded—and had frosty white eyes. He was probably dressed in brown—"

"Yes," she said. "I know who you mean. He's come through here many times. I don't like him, he scares me." She frowned. "Several weeks ago, you say? Now I remember. Goodness, yes! He came in with a young man. The young man got off—and the man in brown went on into town."

Claybourne asked urgently, "What happened to the young man? Do you recall?"

"I recall very well—and so would you if you'd been behind the bar where I was." She met his eyes squarely. "It gave me the creeps so that I could hardly sleep that night. This young man come up to the counter, he's just a country-boy, but well dressed, he's kinda excited about coming to Nashville and all. He asks me lots of questions and orders a tankard of milk and nutmeg. He's drinking this milk and chatting with me when this other man walks up—"

"You mean the man in the brown suit!"

"No, he's done left on the stage into town. This is a third man I'm talking about. He's a sad looking fellow in a shabby black claw-hammer coat and a mouldy old black beaver hat. He introduces himself to the young man as Professor Lacefield. The young man says, respectfully, "Are you a college professor?" and the man in the black coat says, 'Not exactly—I'm a professor of bones and skulls.' He asks the young man if he has any place to spend the night and the young man says no. Then the professor invites the young man to lodge overnight with him, he explains that he has an establishment out on Cedar Street."

"And the young man accepts?"

"He jumps at the chance—and off they go, arm in arm." The barmaid hesitated. "That's all I know."

"That's enough," Claybourne said. "And thank you."

III

THE BEGGAR OF JOSLYN

ALREADY Claybourne was learning his way about the town's crisscross and crazy angled streets. He had little difficulty in locating the "establishment" of Professor Lacefield when he narrowed down his search. The yellow, boxlike house sat back on a grassless lawn, between a livery stable and a warehouse; light shone through the draperies on the front window. A five foot canvas banner nailed above the door said in curlecued and flourishing letters:

PROFESSOR LACEFIELD'S LYCEUM

Lectures in Phrenology
Any Hour—Day or Night

The professor, himself, answered Claybourne's knock, invited him formally into his living-room.

Lacefield was a medium-sized man, generally nondescript, with dessicated pouches under his eyes; his mouth was quick-moving when he spoke, lively, but other than this—when his face was in repose—he gave the studied impression of academic profundity. His black hair came down into his pallid forehead in a widow's peak; he was wearing the shabby swallow-tail coat that the barmaid had mentioned. He clasped his hands piously across his stomach, said, "Welcome, fellow scholar. I can give you my lecture for one dollar, if you'll step into the auditorium—or we can go through the discourse in the study, for fifty cents?"

Claybourne said, "I'm trying to locate a young man named Barnaby Shattuck. Five dollars if you can help me."

"Five dollars?" Professor Lacefield sucked his cheek. "This way, sir. No doubt you want privacy."

The phrenologist's study was like a last year's sparrow nest. Books, stacked on their sides, rose in columns along the baseboard, half the height of the wall. There was a kidney desk, with foolscap and pens, medicine bottles and a large well-oiled Colt. Beside the revolver was a chessboard, and Claybourne observed that the pieces were set up childishly, without rhyme or reason.

Professor Lacefield said, "Sit down, sir. Sit down. Whup! Excuse me." Just as Claybourne bent his knees, preparatory to perching himself amidst some litter on the horsehair sofa, the phrenologist's arm snaked forward and his hand withdrew holding a large tannish-gray object. To Claybourne's astonishment, he observed that the professor was retrieving a skull. A shiny, grinning skull.

"This is Lady Tryphina," Lacefield said amiably. "I use her in my lectures. Think nothing of it. A phrenologist is a professor of skulls. I believe you said something about—ahem—five dollars?"

Claybourne produced the money, laid it on the phrenologist's knee. "As I remarked, I'm searching for a young chap named Barnaby—"

"Shattuck. Yes. Why do you come to me?"

"The boy posted a letter home a few weeks ago. He said that he'd just arrived in Nashville, that he'd made your acquaintance at an inn at Cockrill Spring, the *Blue Goose*. He said that you'd invited him home with you to spend the night. That's the last we ever heard of him."

"Who," Lacefield asked diffidently, "are you representing?"

"I'm here for a kinsman of his, a Mr. J. R. Shattuck."

"A wealthy kinsman, eh? In that case we must raise the fee another five."

Claybourne shook his head, "We've made our bargain."

Lacefield said genially, "Well, there was no harm in trying. In my trade you keep up the pressure—you've no idea how many odd pennies one picks up that way. Hohum! Now we'll get back to Barnaby. He was the best assistant I ever had—it was most aggravating to lose him."

"Are you saying he was in your service?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. Not in my service. He was a young chap with a bit of money of his own. He just liked my work;

the more we talked about it, the more he became fascinated with it. He was especially fond of Lady Tryphina. There was a boyish charm about him; he could stand out on the sidewalk and have the auditorium full with no effort at all. We really made money while Barnaby was here—"

"Why did he leave?"

"And why did he come in the first place?" Professor Lacefield meditated. "There was a bit of a puzzle about Barnaby. Sometimes I had the feeling that he was merely using me, my establishment, as a sort of sanctuary. From the minute I first spoke to him, at the *Blue Goose,* to his departure, I sensed a sort of hounded quality about him."

Claybourne said again, "Why did he leave?"

"Well, it's a strange story. One afternoon I was giving a lecture. After it was finished a gentlemanly old man, an amateur phrenologist named Zuigi introduced himself to me."

"Did he wear a rumpled linen suit," Claybourne asked. "Was he stooped, and did he have a big, horsey nose?"

"He did that, sir. A big nose—and he acted a bit intoxicated."

Old J. R. Shattuck, the planter from Mississippi! Claybourne tried to fit it in, could make no sense of it. Professor Lacefield continued, "This Mr. Zuigi asked me if I had a young man living with me. I said yes. That night, while I was down by the river sampling a shipment of New Orleans rum which had just come up, he left me. Skipped. Without so much as saying goodbye. And to make matters a little more unpleasant, I discovered he took Tryphina with him."

Claybourne indicated the skull on the phrenologist's lap. "But I see he brought it back!"

"This is the current Lady Tryphina. That was another."

"Don't tell me there are two!"

Professor Lacefield appeared to be enjoying some secret joke. He said, "I'll tell you something I've never mentioned to a living soul, Can you keep it to yourself?"

"I'll do my best."

"As far as I'm concerned, these skulls are worthless. I've got dozens of them! Not here in the house, of course, but in a certain location which I do not care to divulge. Two years ago, up in the northern part of the state, I was prowling the uplands and I discovered a cave. Do you know what was in that cave? An old Indian graveyard. Bones and skulls and pottery. Periodically I pay that place a visit. And replenish my stock. I'm an absent-minded man, sir; I'm forever mislaying skulls and bones. I'd gladly give you this one to take along with you tonight as a memento but it happens to be the last I have on hand."

CLAYBOURNE got to his feet. "You're very kind, sir, but I wouldn't know what to do with it if I owned it. If I have your permission, I may come back some other time. I have the impression that there's something important which appears to have evaded me. Goodnight, Professor."

Lacefield led him to the door. In parting, he said, "Should I desire to earn five dollars more, so easily, where might I find you?"

"Tonight," Claybourne explained, "I'm staying with a friend. Tomorrow I'll be at Hufford's boarding house. You'll find me there."

When Claybourne returned home, he found that Spence Kelty had retired—but the next morning, the boy was up and around long before the hatter had fully awakened. The breakfast tray was carried in by the pimply faced youth he'd met yesterday afternoon; Spence greeted the youth with a gesture of boredom, said, "Clay, I want to make you acquainted with Mockie Hufford. His old man runs this place."

Woodenly, Mockie laid out the bowls and pitchers as Claybourne asked, "What did you boys do last evening?"

Spence said righteously, "We done our dooty."

Claybourne pulled over a bowl of hominy grits and cracklings. "What? You did what?"

"I say we done our dooty. When a man tries to give you poisoned molasses candy, it's your dooty to find out all about him. That's what me and Mockie done. We found out about Mr. Merryweather."

"Mr. Merryweather!" Claybourne was stunned. "How—?"

"When a pore orphan has a gardeen that's too durn stingy to give him spending money he has to pass his time however he can. Mockie and me went out and found Merryweather. He lives in a great big ole stone house with a red gate, on Spring Street."

"Wait a minute," Claybourne said. "Let's proceed methodically. Just how did you—"

"I been around," Spence Kelty said condescendingly. "I know the ways o' the world—"

"You can leave that part out. I've heard it before."

"Clay, you take one of them fancy fellers like Merryweather, they all got one weakness—they can't tolerate to eat at home. Where they ain't nobody to look at 'em while they're a-doin' it. They got to pick some public place to do their devourin'. Me and Mockie just went the rounds until we spotted him. He was slicing a goose and soppin' up Madeira at a hotel—"

"But how did you find out where he lived?"

Spence said disparagingly, "Cuffee, we had that all figgered out. We waited outside for him. Me, on one side of the street, by the door, and Mockie on the other. When Merryweather came out, I walked up and said, 'Howdy, Mr. Merryweather, would you come along with me a minute. I know a feller, meaning you, who would sure like a talk with you.' I figgered that would scare him—and it did, he turned the color of a nice ripe pumkin. He took out a little pair of nose glasses on a silver handle, held the contraption up to his nose and said, 'Go way, go 'way, I never saw you before!' I said 'scuse me' and done like he told me, walked down the street."

Claybourne grinned. "And Mockie followed him?"

Mockie said, "That's right, Mr. Claybourne. He went to this house on Spring. He reely throwed them fancy feet o' his like he was in a trotting race!"

Claybourne arose, reached for his hat. "Now that's very interesting. I don't know when I'll be back. You boys stay out of trouble."

Spence said quietly, "And you stay out of trouble, too, Clay."

THE old house on Spring had a stone wall topped by a row of sharp iron spikes; Claybourne pushed open the red gate and stepped inside. He walked up the crushed limestone drive, snowy white in the soft clouded light, past the ornate stable, through a long garden of formal flower plots and trimmed box. This brought him up to the side veranda of the mansion. He crossed the porch and laid the brass knocker thrice against its escutcheon. Hardly had the harsh vibrations dissipated than the door opened.

Merryweather himself answered the summons. He wore a rich morning robe of emerald lustring and satin slippers, and held a stag-at-bay meerschaum pipe clamped between his moist lips. When he recognized Claybourne, purple and violet veins showed suddenly through the translucent skin of his chubby cheeks. Claybourne said, "Morning, sir. Poisoned anybody lately?"

Merryweather took the pipe from his lips, said in a burst of cordiality, " 'Pon my word, well bless my heart! It's the gentleman that succored me when I was a wayfarer, the good Samaritan! Come in, sir! I'm just finishing breakfast. Perhaps you'll have a cup of tea with me!"

"I'll come in," Claybourne said pointedly. "But no tea. I've a long memory."

The east side of the house was a vaulted sun room; the floor was of delicate marble; flowers and ferns were banked along the walls. Merryweather bowed his guest into a rosewood chair; warily, Claybourne sat down.

The jolly little man was not so jolly now. After an awkward silence, he said, "You made some sort of a joke outside. I didn't quite catch—"

"It might be a joke to you," the hatter said bluntly. "Excuse me if I don't laugh. I was referring to that incident back at Corryville. You and your carriage wheel. You attempted to kill me, and the boy, and the horse to boot. I've come prepared for the proper action—and I don't mean a duel. I'll give you a minute to think it over. Maybe

you'd like to say a few words on the subject."

Mr. Merryweather's froggy eyes protruded. He said with difficulty, "If you've come for action, as you claim, there's very little I can do about it. You've got me dead to rights, I'm afraid. The powder in the tea canister, and the oats, were safe enough—you could never prove anything there. But the candy. I was foolish enough to hand you that in person. Any apothecary could affirm that it was—er—toxic. This, I will insist, sir. I wasn't responsible for my conduct."

"You thought I was Captain Slater. You saw the wagon and knew that Captain Slater had an apprentice with him. That means you'd been informed on the situation. You didn't know Slater by sight, someone had given you information. Who?"

"A man I know only as Bouchelle. A Frenchman who wears thick spectacles. I only saw him once—"

Claybourne said, "But that man is a friend of Slater's. Or rather, was a friend."

Merryweather said gravely, "Then why did he ask me to do such a terrible thing." Abruptly, he sat bolt upright. "You say he *was* a friend, *was*. Are you implying that this Captain Slater's dead?"

Instantly Claybourne realized that he'd blundered. He said mildly, "I know nothign about Captain Slater, dead or alive, but Bouchelle I'm acquainted with. I mean to say that Slater, in Bouchelle's eyes, has slipped from grace. He was a friend of Bouchelle's—but he is no longer."

"Oh, I see." The information seemed to interest the chubby man. "How did a man of your obvious respectability meet a rogue like the Frenchman?"

"I'm asking the questions, sir. And I put it right back to you."

"I see. Well my relation with the Frenchman was a matter of finance. It's extremely mortifying to have to go into this, sir. You see, being a sporting man, I've managed to fall rather heavily in debt. Word of that sort of thing gets around among the riff raff.

"One night this Bouchelle person comes here to my home. He gives me the powder, tells me to waylay a certain Captain Slater just outside of Cottyville. He says because of my gentlemanly bearing I can get away with the carriage wheel ruse. He pays me one thousand dollars."

"And you hated to do it, but you needed the money?"

"That's it exactly, sir. I see you perceive the crux."

"Do you know a man named Joslyn Hall?"

"Everyone here in Nashville knows of Joslyn Hall. It's not a man, however. It's an old run-down plantation—about a mile out on the Franklin Pike. Why?"

CLAYBOURNE didn't answer. After a moment, he asked, "Why, when I last talked with you, why did you tell me that meaningless lie about being expelled from the Truax House to make room for a Mr. J. R. Shattuck?"

"Was that the name? I'd forgotten." Merryweather sucked his meerschaum. "All that was part of my agreement with Bouchelle. I was to—er—secrete the powder. And to give that message about Mr. Shattuck. Who he is, I haven't the slightest idea."

"According to the plan, you were to poison the captain—and at the same time give him a message. Why give a dead man a message?"

"When you think of it, it is strange, isn't it?"

Claybourne asked gently, "The plan did not succeed; have you ever killed anyone before this?"

"No, no, no! On the Book I have not, sir."

"Do you know a man named Lacefield?"

"Yes. Here you have a man and not a country estate as in the case of Joslyn Hall. Professor Lacefield is a phrenologist, and an extremely good one. Are you interested in phrenology, sir?"

"No. But I'm interested in Professor Lacefield." Claybourne got to his feet. "I'll not keep you any longer, sir. I have against you the fact of attempted murder. That is all at the present, sir."

Merryweather looked disturbed. "And I thought we were getting along so sociably!"

Claybourne said coldly, "I can't stomach a liar."

Mr. Merryweather went scarlet, and then ashen. He spoke steadily, in an entirely new voice. "I'll not listen to a tradesman blackguard me in my own home. Explain that statement, sir, and be quick about it!"

"Glad to oblige," Claybourne nodded. "Among your most glaring falsehoods was the tale of your relationship with the Frenchman, Bouchelle. You say that he came here one night and sent you on a mission of murder. You say he was a complete stranger to you. Yet you know him by name. It's fantastic to believe that Bouchelle coming to you, hiring you to kill, should identify himself. What have you to say to that, sir?"

Merryweather crumpled. He said waveringly, "I met him at a card game. Yes, that's it. I didn't want to admit it because he's no gentleman. It's a disgrace for a man of my standing to game with rabble."

Claybourne looked disgusted. "You'll have to do better than that," he said. And added vigorously, "Cuffee!"

THE green caravan, Claybourne alone on the seat, turned from the Franklin Pike into the lane of the estate known as Joslyn Hall. Merryweather had said the place was run down; that was putting it mildly. Rarely had the hatter seen such neglect and desolation. He drove Allurah through the gateposts, by the broad, uncut lawn to the grand old house perched on a knob, which at one time had been a very fine residence indeed. A two-story porch extended across the front, and along one side, supported to the cornices by huge vine-hung pillars, as large as hogsheads. The shingles of the four-square roof were cupped and warped, here and there weather boarding had fallen from its sides exposing the ugly skeleton of its joists.

Claybourne reined Allurah, dropped her hitching weight, and climbed the sagging steps to the porch. A man was sitting in the shadow of a big column, lounging in a hickory rocker. He arose as Claybourne approached, thrust out his hand, said, "Welcome to Joslyn Hall. I see you come in a hoodlum wagon. Are you a peddler? Peddlers are my kind of folks." He bowed from the waist. "I'm Joslyn—of Joslyn Hall. Do you happen to have any bourbon in that caravan?"

Claybourne studied his host. He was middle-aged and dressed in seedy black broadcloth. His silver hair was worn long, to his jacket collar; his cheeks drooped in finger-like folds about his querulous mouth and his eyes danced in constant motion. The hatter said, "No, I'm sorry, sir. I have no whiskey in the wagon."

Joslyn said nervously, "Well, that's good news, sir, because neither of us should drink it so early in the day. Won't you come inside? I make it a daily habit to follow the sun around the house. Now, what sun there is, should be in the upper back sitting room."

Claybourne followed his host inside; one thing he was sure of—Joslyn was no Southerner; he had the twang of New England in his speech. They entered a darkened hall, passed a newel post with an exquisite ram's horn, and ascended the stairwell to the sec-

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ond story. Here, they went along a broad corridor, past bedroom after bedroom, and turned through a doorway at the rear.

The upstairs sitting room was bare, miserly in its appointments. Tall windows were open onto the upper veranda and from where the two sat, they looked out over house-grounds at the back.

The vista was a charming one, the gentle hills a soft green in the gray light, the rich grasslands rolling along the fertile bottoms. About two hundred yards away, beyond the rickety outbuildings, was a slope of sedge and holly. Down this hillside ran a Y-shaped ravine, eroded from the red clay. The two upper forks of the gully were of unequal length, the longer tine arising by the hill's crest, the shorter starting halfway down the slope, both joining in a common trunk which made confluence with a meandering brook in the meadow. Claybourne said dreamily, "I'm a city man. I've always wanted to own a place like this. How much land is there here?"

Joslyn seemed hardly interested. "Three thousand acres they tell me. Rich, deep land, all of it. Do you happen to have a stogie on you?"

"Sorry, I don't smoke." Claybourne pondered. "This question is a bit personal, sir. But why don't you till your land? It's income, properly tended, would be stupendous!"

"That's quite true," the man in the broadcloth suit said, "but labor and administration doesn't appeal to me. I'll sell it if I get my price—but I won't farm it. I would not know how to go about it, for one thing." His face drooped sadly.

CLAYBOURNE frowned ponderously. "If you really wanted to sell, you should have no trouble at all in disposing of such property. Why didn't you sell to Steve Alcorn? He liked it, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes! Mr. Alcorn liked it, right enough. But the young man simply could not bring himself to raise the money. He had it, too, I understand, but you know how small-town boys husband their pennies." Joslyn smiled graciously. "But I monopolize the conversation. Let's discuss you, sir. I don't believe I've ever seen a peddler just like you. What do you hawk?"

"I'm no peddler. I'm a hatter."

"Not a peddler? Think of that. And what is a hatter doing driving a van lettered 'Captain Slater, Ltd.,' as though he were a vendor?"

"There are no letters on my caravan," Claybourne said good-naturedly. "Didn't you observe? It's painted green?"

"With a cheap gloss paint, yes. However the finish appears to have dried unevenly, according to the undercoat. As you came up the lane, I could catch the light across the caravan's side. Dullish letters in the gloss showed up most definitely—" Downstairs, a metallic gong clanged. "Pardon me, we have more guests. I wonder who—" He walked out onto the veranda, peered downward. "I always like to see who it might be, what sort of equipage my company arrives in. A habit, I guess. This is a rented buggy. I don't know who—" He ambled from the room.

A FEW moments later he returned. And with him was Mr. J. R. Shattuck, of the Truax House, the planter from Mississippi. Mr. Joslyn was effusive. But the planter seemed distraught; his long, horsey face somehow expressed a mixture of anxiety and smug self-satisfaction; he dropped heavily into a chair by Claybourne's side, crossed his long legs in their rumpled linen, said in recognition, "Good morning, sir. I did not expect to find you here."

Claybourne answered, "I get around. It's a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Shattuck."

Joslyn beamed. "So you know each other? Splendid." He looked bewildered. "Did you two have an appointment here? I don't quite gather what it's all about. Now this nice gentleman here in the linen suit—did he say your name was Shattuck?"

"J. R." The planter glared fiercely. From Mississippi, sir. A kinsman of Barnaby Shattuck." His voice ended in dark menace.

"Barnaby Shattuck?" Mr. Joslyn arched his eyebrows, pursed his lips. "A remarkably unforgettable name. I don't believe I've ever heard it—"

The planter leaned forward, clasped his

thin hands about a knobby knee. "Never heard it, eh? Let me tell you about Barnaby. He was just a stripling; he inherited a bit of money. A man came down into Mississippi and got talking to him, got him all worked up over buying a profitable piece of property. Barnaby left home."

Mr. Joslyn looked sympathetic. "He'll come back. He's no doubt in Memphis or some place, sowing his wild oats."

"He's not in Memphis, he's in Nashville. And in my opinion, he'll never come back." The planter bared a mouthful of close-set yellow teeth. "I've come to Nashville to track him down."

Joslyn said enthusiastically, "For heaven's sakes! You've got me interested now. Have you had any luck?"

"Yes. This morning I had a bit of luck. I uncovered a strange bit of information. I learned, from a note at my hotel, that Barnaby had you in mind when he came to town. That it was this place here he was going to buy. What have you to say to that?"

Claybourne asked genially, "You gentlemen are not doing this just for my benefit, are you?"

They ignored him. Joslyn said absently, "On and off, I've had offers for my estate. But this Barnaby—"

Again the doorbell clanged downstairs. Joslyn said, "Pardon me." He walked out on the veranda, bent over, and peered downwards. When he returned, he seemed worried. He gestured to Claybourne, said politely, "You, sir, would you come with me a moment, please." To Shattuck, he mumbled words of apology.

CLAYBOURNE left the room with his host. Out in the hall, Joslyn said nervously, "Something's coming off here this morning that I don't like. I might need help—and I feel that I can trust you. You know what?"

Claybourne shook his head. Joslyn explained, "When I looked down into the yard just now, I saw no buggy, other than Mr. Shattuck's in there. No riding horse either. Just your wagon and that gentleman's buggy. I have no near neighbors. We're too far from town for a visitor on foot. What do you make of it?"

"I'd suggest you let this new guest in and we'll see."

They stood in the hallway, just outside the open doorway of Mr. Joslyn's bedroom; Claybourne could see into that bare room, through the open windows, out onto the veranda. Joslyn stared down the murky stairwell, toward the front door.

He said, "I don't care for this at all, sir. I'm a recluse by nature and look at the number of guests, unknown, uninvited guests that are traipsing about my home!" He started down the steps. "You stay there. If anything happens to me, come on the run."

In the gloom below, Mr. Joslyn opened the front door. There was a mushroom of soggy, gray daylight in the ornate downstairs hall. Joslyn's puzzled voice called up, "Very strange. There's no one here. I'll just step out and—"

He disappeared outside. Two watch ticks later there was a shot.

Crack! And the sound came from the rear of the hall, from the direction of the sitting room, and Mr. Shattuck.

COOLLY, Claybourne kept his head. It was in the hatter's nature to apply reason to every situation. He turned his attention from the stairwell to the glimpse of the veranda beyond the bedroom window. As he knew, there were only two entries to the sitting room—through the door a few feet from where he stood, and from the veranda. It seemed to him that the person who had fired the shot must have passed along this upper porch.

If so, he never returned. The veranda remained deserted.

Mr. Joslyn came hustling up the steps. Together they entered the sitting room.

The planter lay in the rattan chair, sprawled laxly, as though he were in a drunken slumber. A pistol ball had entered his brain above his left eye and there was a trickle of blood on his cheek. He'd died instantly.

Mr. Joslyn was appalled. "What have I done," he exclaimed, "to have brought this

calamity upon me? I see no pistol. This man was murdered. But who could have done it! How could a prowler get in! I was on the doorstep outside, and you were in the hall. Thank God, we can prove each other's innocence!"

"Claybourne said wistfully, "You present quite an enigma. I'll go into town and send out the sheriff. By the way, I'm staying at Hufford's boarding house, should you need me."

Mr. Joslyn nodded, unhearingly.

Alone, outside, Claybourne walked to the rear of the house, examined the lower porch. A moment ago he'd entertained the theory that possibly the killer had climbed the pillar. That would have explained everything. He could have rung the doorbell to draw Joslyn from the room, climbed the pillar, and shot Shattuck in the interval of privacy.

A look at the pillars, however, and Claybourne knew this hypothesis wouldn't stand. The mighty cylinders were simply too large. No human arms could get sufficient purchase on their smooth sides. And the vines which covered them, the frail tendrils of Virginia creepers, were not strong enough to support the weight of a small monkey.

Back in town, he made his way directly to the Square, identified himself to the sheriff —and told his story, the story of Joslyn Hall.

IV

The Honest Skull

SPENCE was off and away with Mockie when Claybourne returned to Hufford's to stable the mare and get a bite of lunch. He cautioned the proprietor to hold his young ward until supper time should he wander in—and in so doing, learned that two messages had been delivered for him during the morning.

The first had been folded from the flyleaf of an old book. The paper was smeared and uncouth—and the writing matched the paper. The scrawl of childishly illiterate letters said, *"This is easy worth ten dollars— Prof. L."*

The second was a large dignified square of cream-colored stationery. In neat, shaded copper plate, it read:

> Sir:—In our conversation last evening you neglected to mention your name. However, I'm sending this by the Truax houseman and have given him a good description of you.
>
> I think we are definitely on the trail of my kindsman, Barnaby.
>
> This morning has been a most eventful one for me. Hardly had I finished breakfast than I received a certain Lacefield in my quarters. This Lacefield is a phrenologist with whom Barnaby appears to have resided on his arrival in town. Lacefield, for five dollars, sold me the information that a man known as Bouchelle was most interested in my presence in town. It appears that this Frenchman is very superstitious and has frequently consulted the professor.
>
> Now listen to this. No sooner had Lacefield left, than Bouchelle himself visited me. A most repulsive person. He intimates that Barnaby was the victim of a clique of felons that have a side line of burglary.
>
> They conceal their loot, he says, in an old abandoned market-house on Sinton Street. He wants me to meet him there tonight at eight. I scarcely know what to do and would like your advice.
>
> Respectfully,
>
> J. R. SHATTUCK.

PROFESSOR LACEFIELD threw back the mildewed draperies from the window, let the dove-gray light of day into his topsy-turvy study. Gradually, in the last hour, the muggy air had gone into mist, and the mist into drizzle. The satin, bodyless rain flushed the cheap glass pane in a gentle veil of opacity; Claybourne said, "Ten dollars is a lot of money. I'm not sure that I'm prepared to pay it."

The professor picked up the skull of Lady Tryphina, laid it on a stack of musty books, seated himself on the broken-down horsehair sofa. He lifted the tails of his claw-hammer coat, folded them forward into his lap. His eyes were steady, specula-

tive—predatory. "Wait until you hear what I have to say, Mr. Claybourne."

"How did you learn my name?"

"When you were here last night, you gave me your address at the boarding house—but not your name. That was no oversight on your part." The professor held out a stubby hand, inspected his grimy fingernails. "You were taking precautions. If I wanted to contact you, I'd have to *inquire* for you. I would have to ask Mr. Hufford himself about you. Thus, if anything disastrous should happen to you—I'd be on docket as a suspicious person. I got around that by sending a note to you *via* an errand boy. I merely told this boy where to go, and said you had red hair. That did the trick. You got the message. I stayed in the background."

Claybourne asked, "Is something disastrous going to happen to me?"

"Speaking as a hungry student of mankind, and not as a phrenologist, I'd say quite likely."

"You sent the message by a boy. You stayed in the background. I see. Now why?"

"Because," Lacefield answered, "because I have the growing impression that it's going to be a profitable background. Not you and your five-dollar doles. I'm referring to big money in big lots. After you left last night I got to thinking. First, I got to thinking about you. You're not a man of wealth but you're a man of obvious shrewdness. Money must come hard to you—yet you call on me and toss five dollars in my lap as though it were nothing. Why?"

"To learn about the disappearance of Barnaby Shattuck."

"So you said last night—and I didn't believe you. Now I do." The professor watched the mist on the window. "I have the feeling that the man who knows about Barnaby Shattuck will be in a position to—well, reap a fortune."

"Blackmail? Are you accusing me of—"

"We'll leave you out of it for a few minutes. Now, I'm considering myself. I'm beginning to believe I'm a man with a future."

The professor's eyes burned in avarice. "I'll tell you this, sir. Big profits are being made and I'd like to be in on it."

"Criminal profits?"

"I'm not squeamish, my friend. I've seen too many lean days. Do you want to go along with me?"

"No," Claybourne said.

"Then lay your ten dollars on the table, that's right, and I'll fulfill my promise. Mayhap, despite your pristine obstinacy, we will be of mutual assistance. You remember last night I told you that a man calling himself Zuigi came to me and asked about young Barnaby? Well, I got to wondering. I seemed to recall that Barnaby had seen me talking to this so-called Zuigi. That night my assistant vanished. I wondered if he'd been frightened away by this Zuigi!"

"So that was the night he left and took the skull, eh?"

"Did I say he took a skull? I don't remember. I have so many. Now, we come in from a tack. I have among my clientele an ignorant Frenchman known simply as Bouchelle. He's consulted me at various times before setting out on mysterious business ventures. Strictly speaking, a phrenologist has no powers of prognostication—but Bouchelle doesn't know that, and the color of his money is excellent. Gradually, I got the feeling that the business ventures were criminal enterprises."

Claybourne looked sleepy. "Very likely they were. What of it?"

"Ha! He says what of it! You know what of it." The professor smiled diabolically. "Last night, Bouchelle came again. He, like you on your earlier visit, wanted me to help him find a man. Not my assistant, Barnaby, but, of all people, an elderly, drooping man in a rumpled linen suit. A man with a big nose. This so-called Zuigi. He described the conformations of Zuigi's skull to me in detail; where he asked, would such a man, with such a cranium, be likely to hole up. I told him I'd find out—and report to him this morning, which I did."

Claybourne said, "And his name was J. R. Shattuck, a kinsman's of Barnaby's—and he lived at the Truax House."

Lacefield said greedily, "He lives at the Truax House, all right. I talked to him. Now, Claybourne, there's a lot of nonsense to this phrenology game—but feeling heads and looking at physiognomies, dozens and

dozens of them, as I do—you get to see that it isn't entirely humbug. There are certain family characteristics that are easily identified."

"Are you saying that J. R. Shattuck had a head similar to your assistant's, young Barnaby's?"

"No," Lacefield said slowly. "I'm saying that your J. R. Shattuck was no Shattuck at all." He picked up the skull of Lady Tryphina. "You see how these frontal plates are flattened above the temple? Barnaby's head was similar to that, not so exaggerated, but along the same general lines. This J. R. Shattuck, alias Zuigi, had definite bulges here. Almost abnormal bulges. Only once in all my work, have I ever observed a head like it. Bouchelle's! It's my bet that Shattuck-Zuigi is an older brother of Frenchman Bouchelle's!"

Claybourne gasped, "Are you certain?"

"I'd swear it."

"What do you make of it?"

Professor Lacefield shook his sepulchral head. "I've given you your ten dollars' worth. My opinions, I believe, are worth much more—and are not for sale. This beautiful thought occurs to me, however. To live at the Truax House, one must be stinking rich. The Bouchelle brothers evidently have access to overflowing coffers. A picture I somehow relish meditating upon."

THE doctor's name was Purley. Claybourne located him after a great deal of walking and many questions. He lived in a little one-story brick house not far from Capitol Hill, a comfortable little dwelling with blue shutters and a white stone doorstep. He answered Claybourne's knock, said yes he knew Professor Lacefield, and asked the hatter into his small parlor.

Dr. Purley was weathered nut brown from sun and wind. His carriage was erect, his voice quiet, level, and his manner that of a patient adult who lives in a world of children. Claybourne felt a great surge of relief; Dr. Purley was the first genuinely honest man he'd encountered since he'd arrived. They sat about the circular parlor table, in the arc of the Camphene lamp. The doctor adjusted the lamp wick so that the glare was mellowed, said, "It's a beastly day, sir. Now what can I do for you?"

Claybourne said, "Dr. Purley, there are some things I have to find out. The questions I'm going to pose to you are of a highly confidential nature, I'm sure, if you are a decent man, you are going to resent them. You will be angered by my impudence—but consider the position in which I find myself. Asking an eminent physician to disregard his professional ethics is no light matter. Frankly, I'm not any too happy over the prospect."

Dr. Purley listened intently.

Claybourne said, "I'm caught up in a maelstrom of tragedy and murder. Those are my credentials—and I'm not at liberty to go further into the subject at this time."

Dr. Purley said, "Try me. Ask me one of those terrific questions. I haven't been angry for a long time. I might enjoy the sensation."

"Very well. As I mentioned on the doorstep, it's about a Professor Lacefield. You say you know him; what do you know about him?"

"Oh, come, now, sir. That's hardly fair. Be more specific."

"What do you know about him? I want every detail."

Dr. Purley considered. "You're right. There is a question of ethics involved. But I somehow sense that you're a sane man and have a sane purpose behind this. It's hardly sporting of me—but I tell you what I know of the professor. I'm the man who keeps him in skulls."

"What! Why he said—"

Purley chuckled. "I know what he said. He tells everyone the same thing. First, he claims that Lady Tryphina is the brain-box of a gentlewoman. And then, when interest is shown, he confesses secretly that he has a sort of skull-and-bones mine up in the northern part of the States. An old cave, an Indian graveyard. It's a romantic touch that he's very proud of. He casually refers to his 'stock.' Offers the Lady to strangers and implies vaguely that he'd had many a skull stolen or mislaid. People eat it up. He can't help being a good phrenologist, they reason,

if he's so well provided for in the knick-knacks of his profession."

"And he buys these skulls from you?"

"Through my office at the hospital, yes. He's been in town for a couple of years, I guess. I understand that he really is a little absent-minded and does actually lose a skull now and then. I think we've sold him three. It's perfectly legal as long as he signs the proper papers. Yes, those skulls are honest skulls."

Dr. Purley left the room, came back with a sheaf of documents. He shuffled through them, said to himself, "Ta-ta-ta! Here we are!"

Claybourne held the paper to the light; the clerical script averred that the undersigned required one skull in the light of scientific education and the dissemination of phrenological knowledge. There were two signatures at the bottom of the document: Thomas Purley, M.D., and Prof. Edwin Lacefield.

The hatter laid the paper on the table-top. "But the skull I saw was old. Old and brown."

"Of course it was. A nice new skull would frighten his clients away. I think he boils them in coffee until they tint up a bit—"

Claybourne said half aloud, "If he's absent-minded and loses them—could it be that it might work both ways?"

DR. PURLEY blinked. "How's that, sir? I didn't quite get—"

"If Professor Lacefield is absent-minded enough to mislay a skull it's quite possible he is absent-minded enough not to notice if a skull was *added* to his stock. Or, more likely, substituted."

"That," Dr. Purley exclaimed indignantly, "is sheer nonsense. You don't foist off skulls on your friends, sir. Skulls are difficult to come by. Skulls, all of them, are, as I've just told you, registered."

Claybourne changed the subject. He asked, "How's Mr. Merryweather of late?"

"A little gout now and then from rich living—but doing very well. How did you know he was a patient of mine? Are you well acquainted with—?"

"How long has it been since the professor has placed an order?"

Dr. Purley ruminated. "About eight months, I'd say offhand. He's doing pretty good this time."

Claybourne bid the doctor good-bye. Things were straightened out now, clearing up. It was about all over. Now, he understood everything, how it was all managed—and who was behind this deadly scheme. He knew something else, too; sitting in Dr. Purley's parlor, it had come to him in a flash. He knew the answer to the secrets of Joslyn Hall.

ALL day long it had been a day of twilight. Darkness came in on the black river mist early; supper time smoke from the town's chimneys fell earthward, mixed with the dank fog, laid itself in diaphanous runnels along the shop fronts. The only street light on Sinton was a long block away and its faint radiance hung in the maw of night, suspended, like a ghostly, luminescent toadstool.

At seven-thirty sharp, a good half hour before the time set on Mr. Shattuck's note, Claybourne stepped into the entranceway of the old market house. He tested the door, found it unlocked—and entered.

It was a great barnlike room, he could tell that intuitively—and it had been long abandoned. The darkness was soft and immobile, with endless depth, and his eyes were unable to make out the slightest shape or outline of a shape.

Systematically, beginning to the left of the door, he made a careful circuit of the vast hall, groping everywhere as he went, learning by touch. There was a broad open space down the center of the building; around the sides were stalls. These stalls were perhaps eight feet wide, each divided from its neighbor by a rough planked partition. He entered every stall, searched it with his outstretched hands.

The building was empty. There was no doubt about it.

He returned to the door, flattened himself against the wall by its hinges. And waited.

He hadn't long to wait.

He heard casual, unguarded footsteps on the brick glazed walk outside. Delicately, he laid his palm against the door panel; after a moment, it swung inward, concealing him. The man was standing there, now. Within an arm's length of him. The door closed.

The sound of boot heels on the rotting floor echoed to the rafters as the man strode carelessly down the center of the hall, away from him.

The footsteps stopped. Suddenly the scarlet-golden flame of a friction match leaped up. The man was Frenchy Bouchelle; he held the wisp of light above his head, his back half turned to Claybourne. The Frenchman's face was relaxed, thoughtful, and the match glow played along the steel-rims of his spectacles. His lips moved silently. He was counting stalls.

The match went out and again there was silence. Black, spongy silence.

Plunged again into impenetrable darkness, the after-image of the eerie picture played across Claybourne's mind. He saw again that placid, merciless face, the glint on the spectacle rims. And suddenly he realized he'd seen another glint, too, the winking gleam of glass overhead. He looked upward. Somewhere there, among the rafters, was a small skylight.

Again the vigil began. The minutes ticked by, perhaps a quarter of an hour.

Finally, he heard the boot heels once more, coming from the entrails of the old building, toward him. This was a crucial moment. Would Bouchelle light another match?

The door opened, closed. And Claybourne let out his breath in a great gust of relief. He was alone.

HE CONSIDERED the situation logically. Bouchelle, obviously, had not come to keep an appointment with the man from the Truax House. It was not yet eight o'clock for one thing. Why, then, had he paid the old market so brief and clandestine a visit? Logic said there was only one answer. He'd been hiding something. Hiding something beneath the floor-boards.

In the spurt of the matchlight, Claybourne too, had counted the stalls. Bouchelle had entered stall number seven.

Claybourne felt his way along the seventh stall, he turned in. He was groping in his waistcoat for a lucifer when his free hand moved unconsciously in a small arc—and touched cloth.

The cloth of a solid, unresponsible shoulder. Claybourne tensed. There was no reaction to his touch whatever. He bent over, his fingers quick, exploratory. He felt a head, and steel-rimmed squarish glasses. He felt a muscular throat—and blood. He drew back his hand, sickened at the shock, and wiped it on his handkerchief.

Slowly, and with infinite care, he made his way to the door, stepped into the fog. Only then, he realized, was he safe.

It had been a cunning trick—and a vicious one. An almost foolproof death trap. At that moment a killer was waiting for him on the roof of the market house, waiting for him to keep his eight o'clock appointment with death.

It was very plain now. The killer had intended to make it a double murder. Bouchelle had been lured there for a quarter of eight. Claybourne had come earlier, but the killer, posted above at his skylight, had not seen him enter. Bouchelle's appointment had been for stall seven—this had been to assure that he would inform the watcher of his presence; the Frenchman would have to have light to count.

When the Frenchman's match had been extinguished the murderer lowered himself by a rope from the skylight and slew his victim in the dark. Those second footsteps had been the killer; the second time the door had opened, that, too, had been the murderer.

He'd made his kill, had walked carelessly out of the building, past Claybourne, to climb again up on the roof. To pull up his rope and wait for eight o'clock. Eight o'clock and Claybourne.

THE sultry storm which had been piling up since dawn let loose with a slashing downpour and a bumbling of May thunder as the green caravan turned from the pike, into the lane at Joslyn Hall. Three of them

were crowded on the seat: Claybourne at the reins, Sheriff Calkin, and the boy wedged between the two men. The sheriff was a soft-spoken little man, with cupped cheeks and the eyes of a quail hunter; he'd spread his rubber poncho so that it protected Spence more than himself. He kept his gaze unwaveringly on the streaming rump of the plodding mare. Claybourne said once again, "Remember, Spence. This might be very dangerous, indeed. I think you can handle it—but I'm not sure. What do you say?"

SPENCE said, "Sheriff, that's sure good chawing tobacco you put out. What gives it that sweet taste?"

A twisting, cracking branch of lightning tore helter skelter down the eastern sky; in its ice-blue brilliance the white mansion on the knob materialized a glittering instant. And then the jet, raging rain was at them again, lashing, rocking the little wagon. Claybourne said, "Did you see it, Sheriff? That Y-shaped gully back on the hillside? I'm telling you, dig there—and you'll find bodies!"

"Tomorrow," Sheriff Calkin said languidly. "Mebbe tomorrow. Tonight I want to know about this J. R. Shattuck that was kilt while you were a-standin' by, so near and yet so far."

Claybourne tied the mare in the lee of the hedge. "We'll go the rest of the way on foot." They dismounted and started up the slope. Claybourne said tautly, "Remember, Spence, you're not to take things into your own hands.

"You do just what I told you, and say what I told you. When he comes to the door, you say the sheriff's down the road and you want to wait for him. That he'll be along shortly. You say that you're a friend of the sheriff's—"

"Hell, I'll say I'm a deppity. That'll—"

"You do what I tell you—or we might be buying you a boy-sized cedar coffin. Now, get!"

The boy walked across the porch, yanked the door-pull. The door opened, and he disappeared within. Claybourne said, "Quickly now.

We'll take every other pillar, you the first, I the second, and so on. There's no time to waste! It shouldn't be hard to locate—when you know it's there!"

It was Claybourne that found it. The last pillar, at the rear of the side veranda.

A small door, concealed by Virginia creeper, had been cut in the column's shaft. They opened it; it was new cut and fitted neatly on new hinges, shrewdly concealed. Claybourne said, "House pillars, of course, are all hollow. Follow me, Sheriff." He crawled into the aperture. "There are cleats inside, here, climbing cleats. I'm going up."

He ascended the four-foot tube, hand over hand, heard the sheriff below him. The cleats were about two feet apart, the floor of the upper veranda, he judged, was perhaps fourteen feet up. Tallying the cleats as he climbed, he pressed the pillar's side at eight—there would be an extra cleat to make the exit easier—and found the upper opening. Silently, he emerged. A second later and the sheriff was beside him.

Sheriff Calkin was whispering angrily, "I bet they's a law agin having sech things. It's illegal, indecent, and downright sneakin'!"

THEY were on the second-story porch looking directly into Mr. Joslyn's sitting-room. Spence Kelty was sitting stiffly on one of the rattan chairs and Mr. Joslyn in his seedy broadcloth faced him, elbow on knee, jaw in the palm of his hand. Cautiously, Claybourne opened the casement window an inch or so.

"—that's what I would do, if I had a fine young fellow like you for a son," Joslyn was saying. "I'd buy him a Shetland and a spanking red rig of his own. Where's your home, son?"

Spence said, "Sheriff Calkin claims you got dead men buried in a gully behind the house here, he says that every once in a while you put one in and shovel the dirt over him. He says that's why one of the forks of this gully is about filled in. Gullies don't fill themselves in, Sheriff Calkins says." This was according to the instructions given him.

Joslyn threw back his head in a burst of laughter. "My, my! How that brings back my youth! Grown-ups were always stuffing me with yarns about ghosts and graveyards and whatnot! But I was naturally gullible —and I guess you are, too, hey?"

"Guess again," Spence said arrogantly. "I don't pigeon easy. I been around—" Claybourne winced; the boy was taking things into his own hands—and that wasn't so good. But the next breath, he was back on the prescribed track. "Mr. Merryweather been around lately?"

"Friend of yours, son?" Joslyn asked indulgently. "I'm afraid I'm not acquainted with the gentleman. You say the sheriff's due to pick you up here shortly. What's he doing in this neighborhood?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He just said come here and wait for him."

"And how did you get here. It's far from town."

"I know how far it is from town, don't I? I rode pillion."

"And he dropped you here. For a nice little visit. Well, bless my heart." Joslyn turned half around. "There's a draught in here, my boy. Oh, the casement's come open a bit. I'll just shut—"

Claybourne and the sheriff stepped out of sight; Mr. Joslyn closed the window. Claybourne said brusquely, "Down below, we go down now."

On the lower porch, the hatter said, "Ring the bell now. And get the boy. I'll meet you at the wagon, Sheriff."

As they buffeted their way through the rain, on the way back to town, Claybourne felt Spence's thin body beside him, shivering like a leaf. The hatter said laconically, "I hope you did precisely as I said, Spence. Were you frightened?"

"Was I what?" Spence Kelty's voice was hard. "Do I look 'fraid now, eh, Sheriff?"

Sheriff Calkin said, "It's kinda dark—but I'd say no."

Spence laughed scornfully. "I had him eatin' out of my hand! He was scared stiff! His face turned white. You'd a thought he'd heard his Maker's Horn. I jest set there, easy-like, and—"

V

MR. MERRYWEATHER HELPS

THEY stopped a moment in Landlord Hufford's kitchen, acquired a big pot of steaming tea, and made their way upstairs to the hatter's modest quarters. Sitting about the hearth, with a token fire of fat-pine splints in the grate dappling the walls with rose-and-violet, with cups of aromatic oolong in their hands, they listened to the crash and rip of the gale across the roof. Sheriff Calkin said, "Joslyn's my man. Why didn't you let me bring him in?"

"We've got to do this right," Claybourne responded. "We can't afford to make a slip. I know more about this business than you do—and let me tell you, it's bad." He addressed the boy. "How about it, Spence, don't you want to turn in? The sheriff and I have business to take care of."

The boy shook his head. Claybourne looked annoyed.

Sheriff Calkin watched the toothy flames weave in and out of the dry wood. "Why was Mr. Shattuck kilt, Ashbell? The county is goin' to ask me that. Hit's goin' to say, Shu'rf Calkin, why was a nice old man like Mr. J. R. Shattuck kilt whilst he was enjoyin' our hospitality away from Mississippi? What am I goin' to answer to that?"

Claybourne held up his finger for silence.

There was a timid rap on the door. Claybourne called, "Come in, come in!"

The latch lifted and Mr. Josiah Merryweather entered. He was dressed in a long traveling cloak and held a small wicker portmanteau under his arm. He said, "This is better than expected. I see the sheriff's here."

"You know me?" Sheriff Calkin asked. "I don't know you."

Mr. Merryweather set the portmanteau by the door, took off his beaver, shook a spray of rain from it. "Mr. Claybourne, I'm leaving by the night-stage. New York, you know. Certain pressing engagements. Tomorrow, I'll be far away. That being the case, I thought I'd like to talk with you before I left. I believe you're, er, involved in a certain unfortunate situation and I feel

that I may be able to help you extricate yourself. I've come here because I want to be of help."

Claybourne said, "That's indeed generous of you, sir. Do you feel the urge to confess murder?"

"You're being facetious, sir. I don't wish to confess anything. I just—"

"You just want to try to befuddle me a little more, eh? You see that I'm gaining considerable headway and you're getting desperate." Claybourne said bleakly, "You'll be surprised to learn, Sheriff Calkin, that this is just the man we're wanting—"

Merryweather puckered his small mouth petulantly. "If you're going to be unfriendly, I think I'll leave." He picked up his traveling hamper, reached for the door-latch.

Claybourne said curtly, "Stay where you are!"

Merryweather looked hurt. "And don't speak to me in that tone. I'm late, I must be getting on—"

Sheriff Calkin joined in. "You heard the gentleman, sir. Stand fast!"

A voice from behind them said pleasantly, "Don't move. Anyone. And that includes the youngster."

Professor Lacefield was coming in the window from the porch over the summer kitchen. In his black swallow tail coat and pallid face, with one lanky leg thrown over the sill, with water dripping from his chin and fingertips, he was a grotesque and evil spectacle. He carried his Colt, loosely, menacingly, and moved inward like a black predatory bird. Merryweather asked smugly, "Did I do all right, Professor?"

"You did splendidly," Claybourne answered. "You distracted us while your master came over the roofs. He's quite a climber, by the way; not so long ago he was up on the roof of the old Sinton Street market house."

Lacefield said, "Sheriff, frankly I didn't expect you to be present. However, that alters circumstances very little. This man who calls himself Claybourne has committed a grievous sin. He's insulted an invalid brother of mine. No true Southerner can tolerate such a slur. I can't—and I know you wouldn't yourself. I'm taking Mr. Claybourne home with me. Where he can apologize like a gentleman and absolve himself of further obligation."

"Fine," Sheriff Calkin said, "I'll just go along."

"No," Lacefield answered quickly. "This is most personal."

"Indeed it is," Claybourne retorted. "Sheriff, this man is really after my hide. He's killed and killed again—and knows that I can prove it. He'll never be safe until I'm completely eliminated. Not only do I place him in jeopardy, but I'm restricting his ambitions toward profitable enterprise. Arrest him, Sheriff. He killed J. R. Shattuck at Joslyn Hall. He's the kingpin, Merryweather's just an awkward accomplice."

Mr. Merryweather cleared his throat. Sheriff Calkin spoke quietly, "You going to give me that gun, sir, or am I going to have to tussle you for it?"

Indecision flickered across the professor's face. He proffered his revolver, butt first, said, "We Lacefields are law abiding men. We want no trouble with sheriffs."

"But you're not a Lacefield," Claybourne said softly. "You're Barnaby Shattuck—just a country boy from Mississippi!"

SHERIFF CALKIN looked startled. "What's that? What you mean, Ashbell?"

"Things have been going around here that you've not been aware of, I'm afraid." Claybourne explained. "For sometime now, a gang of cutthroats have been working a vicious scheme from this town. The leader was a Frenchman named Bouchelle. He had as his henchman a packer known as Benajah; recently they had taken on a ruffian, a new-comer, Captain Slater. Here was their *modus operandi*. Benajah scouted the countryside, with an eye out for young men, preferably orphans, who had just come into money."

Mr. Merryweather said, "Listen, gentlemen. I'm not involved in—"

"You enter the picture later," Claybourne remarked. "Just stick around, we'll get to you. Well, this Benajah would fasten himself on a gullible young heir, persuade him

to borrow heavily on his holdings, and come to Nashville. Benajah had a remarkable investment up his sleeve. This was, of course, Joslyn Hall."

No one spoke. Claybourne went on, "My guess is that Mr. Joslyn is completely innocent—but we'll find bodies on the place to incriminate him. The victim was taken out to Joslyn Hall—he was told that the estate covered three thousand acres. I'm sure we'll find that the grounds are in reality hardly larger than the house lot, and that Bouchelle is the actual owner. Joslyn is a chronic borrower, that appears to indicate he's kept on a small salary. The old ramshackle house with the fake plantation was a natural lure for a country boy with a little ready money."

The professor said, "What on earth is the man talking about?"

Claybourne ignored him. "The victims, Steve Alcorn, for instance, were shown the house by Joslyn who believed that Bouchelle was honest. That's why the ladder in the pillar; Bouchelle had his ways of keeping tab on events. Came a day that the victim had been drained dry. Joslyn was sent away, the victim was lured once more to the farm—and slain. With a sideline of burglary, the plan was a large-scale money-maker. It had its attractions, didn't it, Barnaby?"

The professor clamped his jaw shut.

"Barnaby Shattuck," Claybourne continued, "was a prospective victim. Benajah the Packer found him down in Mississippi and prevailed upon him to come to Nashville. Somewhere along the journey, Benajah tipped his hand and young Shattuck got a glimpse of the idea behind the scheme. Now young Shattuck, here, likes coin of the realm as much as did Bouchelle. He decided to take over, lock-stock-and-barrel. He associated himself with Mr. Merryweather and they got down to brass tacks. They decided to eliminate the ring—up to Joslyn. Merryweather went to Corryville and made an unsuccessful attempt on me, thinking I was Captain Slater."

Sheriff Calkin said, "I'll just round up this Bouchelle—"

"He's dead now. Barnaby has killed him—just as he killed his kinsman, Mr. J. R. Shattuck. Yes, Bouchelle's gang is all gone, now. As I was saying, Barnaby came to town with Benajah the Packer. He'd got the idea to take over en route. He slipped away from Benajah at Cockrill Spring. In the bar there, he met the real Lacefield, a kind-hearted man who invited him home to spend the night.

"Barnaby slew his benefactor that night, or so I feel. We'll find out about that later, we don't need it to hang him. This I know, he assumed the professor's personality. A little rice powder whitened his face, a bit of stain beneath his eyes gave him ten years in age."

Shattuck said, "You're talking like a madman, sir. I've never been so subjected to—"

"You made several bad blunders. Out at Corryville, you had Merryweather mention your elderly kinsman at the Truax House. You thought I was Captain Slater. It was a second string to your bow. You were playing it both ways. If you didn't get me, a Bouchelle man, you would put Bouchelle on the track of this snooping kinsman of yours. Get your rival to do your murder. That was your first mistake."

Merryweather said nervously, "Permit me to repeat. I'm not involved in this—"

"No remarks from you, please," Claybourne said. "You've made it very difficult for me. You're a chronic liar—and a sly one. To get back to your principal. Your greatest fear, Shattuck, was that your kinsman would find you. You called him Zuigi. When that didn't stop me, you made up an elaborate and absurd story about skull conformations which proved that he was really a brother of Bouchelle's! Your purpose here, as when you sent me those two notes this morning, was to do mutual harm to both Bouchelle and the old gentleman."

Shattuck said stolidly. "I'm Professor Lacefield. And I sent you but one note."

"I beg to differ. You sent me two, one written in an illiterate script—Lacefield was evidently a mussy man, I perceive you affect it in your dirty fingernails and uncouth clothes. You even had chess pieces set up to indicate stupidity. One was written in your fake Lacefield handwriting and the other, signed J. R. Shattuck, was in your natural script. You've been well educated.

You talk that way." He paused. "We can prove your handwriting, you know. We can send down to Mississippi and—"

"What," Sheriff Calkin asked, "is this business about a skull?"

"That was Barnaby Shattuck's gravest error. The real Lacefield had a series of skulls that he used as exhibits in his profession. When Barnaby took over, he carried on in the same vein as his forerunner. He assumed the skull on hand as part of his new disguise. When I visited him, he put on a big show about this skull, and talked big, too, *but he handled it like it was repulsive to him.* A veteran phrenologist wouldn't act that way. I got to wondering. I looked up the skull's source, found that Lacefield bought it from the hospital. I found, too, what I was after—a receipt, signed by the real Lacefield. Signed and witnessed. We can find plenty of people, including Dr. Purley, who knew the other man. Shattuck's ruse depended on his glib tongue. He probably told old customers that he was Lacefield's brother—or something to that effect."

The man in the black swallowed-tail coat said belligerently, "I'll stand no more of this! I'm not Shattuck. I'm not Professor Lacefield's brother or anyone else. I'm the one and only Professor Lacefield. Do you hear me!"

"We hear you," Claybourne said. "And what's your full name?"

"What? What did you say? Oh. It's Charles Kittrell Lacefield. I'm called for my father. Now let me out of here—"

"Take them along, Sheriff," Claybourne said. "The right name's Edwin—but you won't need that. You've got them a half a dozen ways. I imagine Mr. Merryweather will be a great help to you, too, if you should need him."

Mr. Merryweather's florid face became wreathed in smiles. "I will indeed, sir. You can count on me—"

ALONE with the boy, Claybourne said, "Tomorrow I look for a shop. Soon I'll be making good hats. Which brings up the subject of Captain Slater's purse—the purse which, ahem, plunged us into so much trouble. The late captain's assets, of this moment, amount to ninety-eight dollars and forty cents." He paused solemnly. "The way I see it, Spence, that money should go to you."

The boy said coldly, "And why not? Of course."

Ashbell Claybourne, the hatter, coughed politely. "However, in consideration of your youth, I've taken the liberty of investing it." He took a bundle from beneath the bed, laid out a small jacket of good cloth with pantaloons to match, produced a pair of glossy new shoes.

Despite himself, the boy's eyes glowed in admiration.

Claybourne next came forth with a small green book. "This, too, is part of your legacy. I purchased it this afternoon—after much earnest consideration. It's entitled, *The Young Gentleman's Guide to Self Improvement or Character, Responsibility, Graceful Deportment, Etc., in Twelve Entertaining Inculcations.* By Reverend Lamar D. Lamar—"

Spence Kelty said artificially, "Thank you, Mr. Claybourne. It's surely pretty. I'll treasure it along with my staghorn knife. O' course I can't read it—I can't read nothing!"

"And that, my boy, is going to be remedied. I've enrolled you with the Reverend Lamar himself—at his boys' school just around the corner. You start tomorrow at eight."

Spence Kelty's pinched face twisted in fury.

"Cuffee!" he shouted. "You can't do this to me!"

Three Men

By Dorothy Quick

THREE men were walking on the beach.
The waves were high, the tide was in.
One man was good and one was hale
And one was neighborly with sin.

Three men were walking on the beach.
The sands stung, sharp as little knives.
A woman watched them as they came
And far behind her stood their wives.

"The catch was fine," the good man said,
High on the dock the fish were piled.
"Meg will be pleased," the second cried
While the third man spoke not or smiled.

Three men were walking on the beach.
The ocean roared. The wind was high
The shots were louder than the waves,
And louder still the woman's sigh.

Three men were walking on the beach
Though one of them could walk no more
Who was deep buried in the sea,
But whose ghost walked the sandy shore.

". . . he put me in that cubby-hole off the storeroom and walled me in. . . ."

Heading by Matt Fox

A Knocking in the Wall

BY AUGUST DERLETH

STAID respectability was personified in Hobart MacLain. He was a man of genteel middle age, who had lived a model life and was frequently pointed out to boys by doting mothers with the plaintive cry, "Why can't you be like Mr. MacLain?" Of course, the boys hated him, which was doing him a singular injustice, for, truth to tell, now that he had passed fifty, Hobart MacLain was uncomfortably often prey to vain regrets that he had not gone out and got more of life at first hand. Corporate law, after all, was hardly the epitome of excitement.

But MacLain's tendency to look upon adventure as something to be had only in distant places was a delusion he ought to have known better than to entertain. He had yearned for adventure of some kind or other, quite secretly, of course, for so long a time that he was ripe for it when it befell him. It came about almost unobtrusively when he bestirred himself to satisfy another desire of long-standing—he bought an old house.

As houses go, MacLain's purchase was attractive enough. It was in an isolated part of the city, well away from the hum of traffic, set back from the street and girt round by trees; it assured privacy for the drudging kind of work MacLain often brought home from the office with him. When he bought it, MacLain, who was not unhandsome even at fifty-plus, set up a

brief flutter in the heart of the forty-year old secretary who had served him for a decade and believed herself in love with him. She had the brief illusion that her employer had designs and strove not to appear too willing; but she might have spared herself the trouble, for MacLain was a woefully unimaginative man, and completely a slave to the hypnotic figures which paraded across the pages of the corporate reports he was obliged to study without permitting him an adequate opportunity for an appreciation of figures chic and female.

Having bought the house, MacLain moved in at once, and took a spasmodic vacation from corporate data by beginning at once to make certain changes. He spent an hour or two every evening, first in one room, then in another, painstakingly removing wallpaper and replacing a new pattern, or taking off varnish and putting on wax, and such similar tasks which, if his activities had been known, would have irritated many an honest laborer with a bona fide union card far more qualified to serve than MacLain. Hobart MacLain, however, was blissfully unaware of anything but the simple pleasure he took in refashioning his home in accordance with his somewhat haphazard ideas.

MacLain had had his new home for approximately two months, and Miss Julia Bennett, his faithful secretary, had long since resumed her normal impassivity, when he began to experience the first of what he came to regard as an extraordinary sequence of illusions. He was at work in a corner room which had apparently been used as a kind of store-room off the kitchen of the house when he became aware of a faint knocking.

He paused in his work. He thought for a moment that the knocking proceeded from within the room itself, but this was so manifestly in error, he was certain, that he dismissed the idea at once and trotted off to the front door, wondering why his caller had not had the good sense to use the bell.

There was no one at the front door.

There was no one at the back.

He returned to his work and heard the knocking again. Actually, it was so faint that it was scarcely audible; it was only because the house was so far back from the street and surrounded by trees that so apologetic a sound could be heard at all. He was mildly vexed, but he was just curious enough to listen.

It was a knocking sound, quite distinctly. He tried to imagine what it could be. A child, a little girl, perhaps, timidly knocking at the door and then running to hide. Like Hallowe'en or May Day Eve. But it was neither of these days; it was, in fact, late May, and the last of the lilacs were shedding their perfume reluctantly into the evening air at this precise hour of the knocking.

The knocking came welling up into the room and fell away into silence. Then again it sounded, and once more silence, like someone waiting . . . waiting somewhat diffidently, for an answer which did not come.

ONCE again Hobart MacLain went to his front door, this time stealthily, in the dark, throwing it open quickly, determined to catch his mischievous caller in the act, and give him a little scare.

But his front door opened on to the fragrant May night alone.

Nor was there anyone apparent on the back stoop.

He paused for a few moments in the kitchen, expecting to hear the knocking again. It did not come. Yet the moment he got well inside the room in which he was at work, the moment he took up his tools to resume his task, he heard the knocking once more.

He stood quite still, trying to fix its direction. Reluctantly, he concluded at last that it did not come from the direction of either entrance to the house, but from somewhere between them. There was no door in the side of the house. There was not even a window in the far wall of the room in which he stood.

Nevertheless, he walked over toward the wall to the east, and he was at once uncomfortably aware that the faint knocking sound had grown or seemed to grow just a trifle louder. He stood again and listened. Yes, certainly, the knocking was over on

that side. Therefore someone be outside the house tapping on the wall.

He went stealthily into the adjoining room, whipped up a window and leaned out.

No one was there.

Baffled, he returned to his work, and heard again that faint, almost shy knocking.

Somewhat alarmed now, he went over and put his ear to the wall. He heard it quite distinctly then; the knocking came from inside the wall—a polite, diffident, but determined sound.

Being a corporate lawyer, Hobart MacLain was of necessity a rational man. Obviously, no one was outside the house besieging the doors or the wall; he had ascertained that. Equally manifestly, no one could be inside the wall. He was thus left with but one conclusion—he was suffering an hallucination.

He promptly switched off the light, left the room, and returned to the far safer figures of the corporate reports on his desk, where he set about the preparation of a brief for presentation to the court the following afternoon.

That he was tired was a fact that was not permitted to deter him. The report had to be studied, the brief had to be written. He wrote steadily for an hour, his mind a maze of figures, before he was aware of the fatigue which was overtaking him. Yet he pushed himself, occasionally checking what he had written. Just past midnight he was grateful for what seemed to him a revitalization of his energies, for his writing hand flowed along with astonishing ease. It was some three minutes before he realized that he had not the slightest idea of what his extraordinary hand was writing.

He pulled it sharply away and stared at the page before him. It began prosaically enough with, "— and the said corporation, having full and complete knowledge of the market value of the common stock, did wilfully—" but here it ended, giving way instead to something that made absolutely no sense to him at all: "Please take away just one brick so I can get out. I, Elizabeth Copper, wife of Kilvert Copper, do solemnly swear that on the 17th day of May, 1933, my husband gave me a poison to drink in a glass of milk, and afterward. . . ."

Here it ceased. Whatever might have followed, he would not know.

Shocked and upset, Hobart MacLain took himself off to bed, secretly harboring grave doubts about his sanity.

"And what does this mean?" asked Julia Bennett of him in mid-morning of the next day, an index finger laid accusingly on the strange sentences which had interrupted his brief of the previous night.

"I really can't say, Julia," he said plaintively.

"It appears to be in your handwriting."

She waited for an explanation with patent patience, a little smile on her lips.

"To tell you the truth, Julia, I wasn't aware that I was writing it," he answered. "I was pretty tired, and my hand was moving, and I was watching it, and then suddenly I began to realize that I wasn't telling it to write."

Julia Bennett allowed her clear blue eyes to examine what he had written once more.

"Perhaps I'm working too hard," he said feebly.

"You certainly are. Married life is too much for you."

"What are you saying, Julia!"

"I mean, you can't serve two mistresses —it's always been the corporations, but now it's the house, too." She clucked chidingly, her cheeks sucked in. "Really, Mr. MacLain, you are burning the candle at both ends."

HE DEBATED telling her about the knocking in the wall, but thought better of it. She would probably ask him to see a doctor without further delay; the very thought of this stirred a deep panic.

"Why don't you let the house alone for one night?" she went on. "You ought to get out somewhere."

"Well, thank you for your interest," he said stuffily.

"Jobs are hard to get these days," she answered instantly. "And a corporation lawyer with a nervous breakdown is of no earthly use."

"I suppose not," he agreed lamely.

Nevertheless, that night he did make an attempt to resume his work in the kitchen. But almost at once he heard the knocking again, and somewhat ashamedly he left the house to follow his secretary's counsel. He went over to his club, where he encountered the real estate agent through whom he had acquired his house. It was not a happy encounter, for the agent, a happy extrovert, immediately brought up the subject of the house.

"Well, MacLain, how are you coming with your house?"

"Fine," said MacLain.

"Good to hear that. To tell the truth, I was a little nervous about it. We've always had the devil of a time with renters—always complaining they hear sounds there. But you know how these old houses creak and groan, and how they knock sometimes."

"Yes, of course," agreed MacLain.

"Matter of fact, the owner didn't seem to care much what we did about it. We kept it idle for a year—on his orders—just in case his wife turned up to contest his disposal of it, and then he gave us a free hand with it. Delighted to know there's no complaint. Of course, if you find anything wrong, we'll adjust that; so don't you worry. The former owner's come into a good deal of money up in Canada."

He blustered away and left MacLain in grateful solitude.

When at last he returned to his home, MacLain sat down to a letter that required writing, having completed his corporative brief that morning in time for its presentation to the court, minus the offending lines which had given him such concern. The hour was late, really too late to write a letter, but MacLain was so accustomed to driving himself that he was incapable of resistance.

He uncapped his fountain pen, put down the address of his brother on the envelope, and began to write. He had a number of things to impart to his brother, none of any consequence, but he was as methodical about replying to letters as he was about everything else. His thoughts, however, were scattered. He kept thinking of that disturbing knocking and fancying that he still heard it, though that could not be. He continued to turn over in his mind the attitude of his secretary, which he found almost as upsetting as the knocking in the room beside the kitchen. Did she intend to leave him, then? He was appalled at the thought of being without her efficiency. What in the world would he do? Secretaries were not easy to train for such difficult and complex positions as hers. And he could not help returning in his thoughts to what the agent had said at the club—tenants had complained of hearing things. Could there be a kind of communicable and progressive hallucination associated with the property?

HIS HAND idled, started forward, and his pen wrote. His thoughts wandered. The clock struck midnight; he wrote on. He was conscious of his tiredness, but he suppressed it resolutely. In half an hour he had finished, and he sat back wearily to reread what he had written before sealing it in an envelope.

He had told his brother about the house, in detail; he had mentioned something of the corporate affair which now occupied his attention. But he was not aware of having written, in the middle of a paragraph on the possibility of growing common orchids on his new property, these lines: ". . . he took me and put me in that cubbyhole off the store room and walled me in, leaving me to die there. I had suspected there was another woman, and there was. I never dreamed that he would go so far, but he knew I wouldn't give him his freedom. Then he put a spell on the wall so I couldn't get out. Please, I must get out, I must find him. Wherever he is. . . ."

"Good God!" exclaimed MacLain and tore the letter to shreds.

He went to bed badly shaken and was unable to sleep for hours, during all of which time he fancied that he heard the knocking in the wall of that room downstairs, and, in addition, a woman's spectral voice begging him to take away just one brick, only so little as one brick, anywhere over that cubbyhole. . . .

In the morning he looked haggard.

Miss Bennett flashed him an alarmed glance and leaned over his desk to snatch away the papers she had left there, but his firm hand had quickly fallen on them just a moment before and did not draw back.

"Please, Julia, I am quite capable of deciding what I should see and what I should not see this morning," he said stodgily. "It is true that I did not get as much sleep as perhaps I should have had, but I am still able. . . ."

At this moment he caught sight of a name on the papers before him. It was "Copper." He stopped talking instantly and gazed at the typescript under his hand. It was apparently a copy of a newspaper story.

"Chicago, May 31. No trace of Mrs. Kilvert Copper has been found, according to local police. Mrs. Copper, who disappeared two weeks ago, was last seen by her husband to board a train for New York at the Union Station. She did not arrive at her destination and no trace of her on board the train beyond Fort Wayne, Indiana, has been discovered. Identity of Mrs. Copper as a passenger has been somewhat confused; one passenger maintained his satisfaction in her identity, while the conductor believed that erroneous identification had been made of a woman strongly resembling Mrs. Copper. On the urgent pleas of Mr. Copper, a local broker, the investigation is being pushed. . . ."

He looked up. Julia Bennett was watching him.

"Her name was familiar," she said. "I thought about it all day yesterday, and last night I went to the library. I found that. They never did find her. But he married again, and the woman he married had her picture in the paper about a year later. She looked very much like his wife."

His mouth went dry. He thought rapidly back to what the real estate agent had told him. "And Copper, what about him?" he asked. "He wouldn't by any chance be in Canada now, would he?"

"Yes, he is."

She looked at him searchingly. "Look here, Mr. MacLain, perhaps it isn't any of my business—but have you told me quite everything about this?"

He hesitated only briefly. "There was some more of that writing last night."

"Automatic writing," said Miss Bennett in a precise voice. "I know all about it. It was someone else using your hand."

"My dear Julia!"

"Don't you 'my dear' me, Mr. MacLain. Let me see what was written."

"I tore it up."

"You would!"

"There was something else though," he went on, hesitatingly. He told her about the knocking in the wall.

"I see," she said when he had finished. "Would you mind very much if I went along to your house tonight and listened for myself?"

He looked startled at the suggestion.

"Don't fret," she assured him. "It isn't leap year and I have no designs on you. It's only that if this matter isn't settled one way or another, you'll be a nervous wreck. I want to see that wall, and I want to hear that knocking for myself."

"All right, Julia. You won't make any more out of it than I did."

She did not remind him that she had already made more out of it than he had.

SO THAT evening he took his secretary out to dinner and the two of them descended upon the house. With admirable efficiency, Miss Bennett lost no time in making her way to the room beside the kitchen, which was torn up still, just as her employer had left it. Hobart MacLain stood anxiously beside her; he heard the faint knocking quite clearly.

"Do you hear it?" he whispered.

"Certainly, I do," she replied. "It's as clear as a bell. Comes from right over there. That wall looks more recently bricked, too. Let me have a hammer and a chisel."

"What do you intend to do?" he asked in some alarm.

"Why, take out some of those bricks, of course. We'll see what's behind there."

"I hadn't intended to alter the wall," he said plaintively.

"Circumstances alter cases," she answered

complacently, and forthwith attacked the wall vigorously with a hammer and a chisel.

Almost instantly the knocking ceased.

"It's stopped," he whispered.

She only nodded and redoubled her efforts.

Finally she loosened a brick, broke it in two with the hammer, and drew the pieces out. There was a rush of cool air from behind the wall, like a blast from a bellows; it fanned out into the room, encompassed them briefly, and was gone. MacLain, somewhat confused, thought he heard his secretary speak.

"You're welcome," he said.

"What did you say?" she turned on him.

"Didn't you say something?"

"No."

"But someone spoke, I thought; someone said. . . ."

"Say it, Hobart."

"'Oh, thank you.'"

"Yes," she agreed matter-of-factly, "I thought that's what I heard."

SHE turned back to the wall once and attacked it with renewed vigor. He seized hold of other tools and began to help. The two of them worked in silence, removing one brick after another, lowering the wall which blocked a onetime cubbyhole off the room, until at last they had it down far enough.

The light from the ceiling gleamed wanly on a pathetic heap of white bones lying in the cramped space behind the wall.

"Now, Hobart, I should think you'll be able to sleep without being interrupted. And to work, too, if you insist," said Miss Bennett. "Though you ought to take better care of yourself. What would I do without those dreary briefs of yours?"

And what, he wondered anew, would I ever do without Miss Bennett? She had called him by his first name.

"I suppose we ought to notify the police."

"I'll call them at once."

She started forward, but he blocked her way.

"Julia," he said with uncomfortable diffidence. "I don't suppose we'd have to wait till leap year."

"Now that you mention it, I don't suppose we would," she answered, smiling.

Once freed of all the interrogation by the police, it was possible for them to attend to matrimonial details. Two mornings after, as they were going out to buy a ring, Julia produced a clipping from the day's *Tribune*, and handed it to him without a word.

He read it in silence.

"Olassie, Alberta, June 4: No clue to the identity of the murderer of Kilvert Copper has been found. Mr. Copper, prominently known as a wealthy mining magnate, was found strangled in his study yesterday. Fingermarks on his throat suggested violence at the hands of a woman. . . ."

He looked up, puzzled. "What an extraordinary coincidence!" he murmured.

"There are coincidences and coincidences," she answered tolerantly. "Dear Hobart, use your imagination."

Hobart MacLain did.

"That poor woman!" he said. "Ten years behind that wall!"

Julia smiled.

And in a sense, thought MacLain, poor Julia Bennett had been knocking on a wall, too. Only he had been too busy to hear it. Actually, then, he had been the means of releasing two women when he took down that wall in his house. Unaware of the meaning of Julia's little smile, he imagined this was true beyond question. He felt very good about it.

Sealed so tightly that even a termite couldn't get into the room . . . !

"Rapport" by MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

in the next WEIRD TALES

ONE OF THE GREATEST STUDENTS OF MANKIND IS THE DEVIL. HIS CUNNING INTELLIGENCE HAS FERRETED OUT MAN'S STRENGTH AND WEAKNESSES, ON WHICH HE HAS PLAYED HIS GRUESOME TUNES SINCE TIME. BY TOUCHING MAN'S WEAKNESSES HE HAS GAINED COUNTLESS MILLIONS FOR HIS KINGDOM OF THE DAMNED. TO SATISFY HIS LUST AND GREED HE GRANTS MAN'S EVERY DESIRE. IN RETURN THE FIRES OF HELL BURN BRIGHTLY TO THE PITIABLE GROANS AND THE UNENDURABLE AGONIES OF HIS SUBJECTS.

Heading by Joseph Eberle

The Little Red Owl

. . . After all, don't children enjoy excitement?

"BY NOW the fire was getting very close to Billy and Gwendolyn," Charles said unctuously. "They could feel the heat against their faces, and it frightened them. All around them the leaves and branches were bursting into flame. They pulled as hard as they could

By Margaret St. Clair

against the ropes the Vulture Man had tied them with, but they could not get loose. Billy began to scream."

He paused in his narrative and looked archly at the children. They were listening intently. He observed with pleasure that they were both pale with excitement and what was pretty certainly distress. "What do you think happened to Billy and Gwendolyn?" he urged them. "Go on, tell me what you think happened to them."

"I know!" Peter said, almost shouting, "I know! The Little Red Owl came and got them out!"

"I'm afraid not," Charles answered smoothly. "Don't you remember, I told you at the beginning of the story tonight that the Little Red Owl has been hurt? He's not strong the way he used to be. The Vulture Man caught him and broke the bones in both his wings. Now he can't fly. All he can do is lie on the ground. And the broken wings hurt him very much."

Charles transferred his attention to Carlotta, who was chewing anxiously on the end of one of her short blonde braids. "What do you think happened, Lottie?" he asked.

She pulled the wisp of hair out of her mouth. "He's not really hurt, is he, Uncle Charles?" she asked anxiously. "Not the Little Red Owl? He's all right. He'll save them. You're just making it up."

Charles sighed. "Both the Little Red Owl's wings are broken," he said patiently. "He can't help Billy and Gwendolyn. He needs help himself. Carlotta. Do you know what is going to happen to Billy and Gwendolyn?"

She put her arm around Peter and hugged him up to her. "What, Uncle Charles?" she asked, as if the contact with her brother strengthened her.

"Why, they're going to be badly burned. Perhaps they will even die before the fire goes out. Do you remember how much your arm hurt when you burned it last week, Lottie?" He pointed to the bandaid on Carlotta's forearm. "Well, then."

Lottie's face puckered up. Her small chest heaved. For a moment Charles thought she was going to scream or slap at him. Then she began pulling her brother toward the door. "Come on, Peter," she said, almost in a whisper. "It's time for bed."

From the hallway she spoke to her uncle in a clear if somewhat wobbling voice. "I don't care what you say. I don't believe it. The Little Red Owl . . . the Little Red Owl isn't hurt. He's all right!"

Charles heard her and her brother stumbling down the hall toward their bedroom. For a moment his eyebrows went up. Then he relaxed. He chuckled. This defiance, of course, meant that Lottie was frightened. Not ill-pleased with himself, he rose from his chair.

MRS. MORRIS, his housekeeper, was in the back sitting room. Under the placid light of a floor lamp she was knitting steadily away on a blue pullover for Peter. After a moment she put her work down and looked at him.

"Are the children all right, sir?" she asked in her pleasant voice. "I thought their voices sounded a little worked-up."

"I was telling them rather an exciting story," Charles said easily. "You know how children are."

"Yes, sir." Mrs. Morris hesitated. "Why do you tell them stories like that, sir? Just before they go to bed?"

Why, indeed? Charles thought. He felt his throat contract in an inaudible chuckle. For he loved them, he loved children, he loved Billy and Gwendolyn—no, their names were Carlotta and Peter—tenderly. "They enjoy the excitement," he said lightly. "Didn't you like ghost stories yourself when you were young?"

"Oh, ghost stories." Mrs. Morris' face relaxed. She stuck the needle in her knit-

ting, put it in the knitting bag. "I'll go tuck them in, sir," she said. "I wouldn't want them to have bad dreams."

She went out. Charles, left alone in the room, stood on the hearth rug jingling the change in his pockets restlessly. Should he have a drink? No, he wasn't thirsty. He picked up a newspaper and put it down again. At last he pulled an arm chair up to the fire. He sat down, picked up the poker, began to tap with it against the burning logs. A cloud of sparks darted up.

Charles watched, smiling. Whenever the swarm of sparks started to die away, he tapped on the logs again. At last he laid the poker aside and sank back in his chair. He began to plan the story he would tell the children on the next day.

THE morning was rainy, in the afternoon there were scattered showers. It was not until later afternoon that Mrs. Morris thought it advisable to let the children out of the house. Charles watched from his study window.

Shouting and laughing, the children ran straight for the wall. Since the wall was less than five feet high it wasn't—Charles thought—exactly dangerous, but it had for the children the special attraction of the disapproved. Lottie clambered up first and then, from her eminence, gave Peter a helping hand. Soon, arms outstretched, they were balancing dramatically as they tightrope walked.

It began to grow dark. Charles came up to them, walking quietly in the dusk. "Lottie," he said, "it's time for you two to go in. I have a new story to tell you tonight."

From under her upraised arm Lottie peered at him. "I don't want to go in," she said sullenly. "Peter and I, we don't like your old stories. We don't want to listen to them."

"Carlotta, do you know what happens to little girls who are rude?"

"N-no," she answered uneasily. He could see that she was getting scared.

"They fall down and break their bones," he said impressively. "It hurts them very much. Carlotta, you're going to fall and break your arms and legs, like the Little Red Owl. That's because you were rude to me."

Lottie's mouth opened. She stared at him. Then she turned to run. Her foot caught. Over she went.

She began to scream hysterically. What a fuss about nothing, Charles thought, going up to her. Because of course she hadn't broken anything; bones at her age were soft, not brittle. Even though she should have. He tried to pick her up, and she crawled away from him, shrieking. And then of course Mrs. Morris had to come out.

Carlotta's knees were bathed and bandaged, she and Peter were given supper on a tray in their bedroom. Mrs. Morris spent a long time with them before she closed the door behind her and came out.

There would, Charles expected, be some kind of interview. He was standing on the hearth rug waiting when she came in.

"I want to speak to you about the children, sir," she said, plunging.

The courage of the timid! Charles thought. "Yes?" he said. He was careful to get the inflection of the word exactly right.

She moistened her lips. "Lottie says—Lottie tells me that you threatened her, sir. She says you told her she would fall and break her bones. As a punishment."

"She was exceedingly rude to me," Charles responded indifferently. Not that it would do him any good to be indifferent—it was an article of faith with Mrs. Morris that children were always right.

"Maybe so, sir. But you mustn't talk to her like that. She might really have hurt herself." She hesitated. "I'll have to tell her mother, sir, when Mrs. Gibbs gets back."

"Tell away," Charles answered, though he could feel himself trembling. It was the unfairness that bothered him. "Carlotta was unbearably rude."

Mrs. Morris bowed her head. It might have been in agreement. After an instant's silence, she continued. "And, sir, you must not tell them any more of those stories. I won't have that."

"Won't?" Charles mocked her.

"Yes, sir. Won't." She looked at him. Her face softened. "I think you ought to see a doctor, sir," she said. "You're not well."

"I never felt better in my life!" It was true. The energy, the force that filled him —it was like a fountain of life bubbling up. He was in love with them. Until now he had not really lived.

"I don't mean that kind of a doctor, sir. I mean—somebody who knows about the nerves. I beg your pardon, Mr. Gibbs. But I can see that as far as your nerves go, you're not well."

There were heavy candlesticks over the mantel. Charles clenched his hands in his pockets. No, he wouldn't. "Perhaps you're right, Mrs. Morris," he said disarmingly. "I haven't been quite myself lately. When Mrs. Gibbs comes back, I'll certainly go see someone."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure it would do you good."

HER righteous back receded in the hall. But now what was he to do? If he told Mrs. Morris to go, pack her things, get out, *get out,* her first action would be to communicate with Sally Gibbs. And that would mean having his sister-in-law to deal with. Charles grimaced.

After a moment he sat down in the arm chair and began prodding absorbedly at the fire.

The days passed slowly, emptily. He kept away from the children and they kept out of his way. Mrs. Morris was always near them, watchful, well-mannered, alert. He had not known time could pass so slowly. He had nothing to live for now.

At the end of the week he went to the city to see a dealer in rare books. "Oh, yes, Mr. Gibbs," the man said pleasantly. "I've a new book, only came in yesterday, in which I think you might be interested. "Here," He handed a copy of *The Secret Museum of Naples* to him.

Charles pushed it away distastefully. "No, not that," he said, trying to keep the scorn out of his voice. "I'll tell you the sort of thing I want." He went into details.

The bookseller listened intently, smiling at first, and then beginning to frown. "Let me see," he said when Charles paused. "Would this be it?" He got a large floppy folio from under the counter and opened it a page.

Charles couldn't help smiling at the picture, but he had to refuse the book. Once more he explained his wants.

"I'm afraid I can't help you," the dealer said at last. "You can see yourself that such a book would be rather, h'um, rather special. I doubt that it exists. A child's coloring book, you say, with a particular picture. Let me think."

He wrinkled up his forehead. Then he scribbled an address on a sheet from a note pad and handed it to Charles. "That's the artist who did the picture you were just admiring," he said. "You might find it worth while to talk to him."

The artist's studio was on the third floor, a big, empty room whose walls were decorated with innocuous flower pastels. The artist himself was a small man with a tight face and watchful eyes. After Charles had talked to him for a while, however, he became more friendly. He got out a portfolio of his drawings; they were very amusing, very amusing indeed. Not at all like the pastels on the wall. Charles congratulated him on his talent. And the artist showed a gratifying readiness at understanding what it was Charles wanted him to do.

He drew a sketch; it was even better than the ideas Charles had had. He knew a printer who could, he thought, reproduce the picture as Charles wanted it. The sum the artist wanted for making the drawing and overseeing its insertion in the books— Charles thought it would be better to have two of them prepared—was certainly large. It was so large that Charles hesitated briefly. But after all, why not? What is money given us for, if not to enjoy ourselves?

ON THE eleventh day the artist telephoned from the city to say that the books were ready. Would Mr. Gibbs come after them? Certainly, Charles said, certainly. His fingers trembled with excitement as he dressed.

"It's page six," the artist said, giving him the picture books. "Of course, until it has been gone over, it doesn't look like much."

Charles examined the inserted page, and nodded. Page six could not be distinguished, superficially, from any of the other pages. It, like they, bore on its surface numerous tiny colored dots, widely spaced, and an occasional solid line.

"I had the printer run off some extra copies of the page," the artist said, picking up a brush. "I'll show you how it comes out. Watch." He dipped the brush in water and began to paint the water carefully over a loose sheet which bore the numeral 6. "There! What do you think of it?"

Charles could only nod with satisfaction. A beautiful job! Of course, the children would probably smear it. It was unlikely that they would paint as carefully as the artist had done. But enough would come through—there was plenty on the page—to have an effect. Oh, yes.

He paid the painter, and left. He carried the books, an innocuous brown paper parcel, under his arm. All the way home, in the taxi, in the station, on the train, he kept caressing it. The feel of the paper against his fingertips delighted him.

It was such a pleasant afternoon that he decided to walk from the station to his house. It would give him more time to plan and anticipate. But when he was about a block away from home he remembered, with a stab of dismay, something he'd forgotten to plan for: Mrs. Morris. Oh, dear.

How could he get her out of the house? A faked telephone message? No, his voice couldn't possibly pass for that of Mrs. Morris' daughter Jean. A telegram? But telegrams always have the name of the receiving office at the top, and Jean lived in Connecticut. If Mrs. Morris noticed *that* little discrepancy, the fat would be in the fire.

Was his whole Argosy of enjoyment going to be wrecked on the rock of Mrs. Morris? After all the trouble he had gone to? It was abominable. His lips shook. But, after all, perhaps he was distressing himself for nothing. It would be difficult to get Mrs. Morris out of the house; but was getting her out of the house absolutely necessary? Wouldn't there, indeed, be an especially subtle pleasure in going ahead with what he was going to do while she was present? He'd have to be careful, but he could manage it. Satisfied, Charles began to hum lightly as he walked along.

WHEN he got home he gave Mrs. Morris the parcel. "I bought these for the children in the city," he said. "Happened to see them in the window of a novelty shop. Do you think Lottie and her brother will care for them?"

Mrs. Morris undid the string. The dubiety left her face as she looked at the lettering on the covers of the big gay paper books. "The Paint-With-Water Color Book," she read aloud. "All you need is water and a brush."

"You understand how it works?" Charles said carefully. "You just take a paintbrush and water, and paint over the pages inside. And the water makes the colors and the pictures come out."

Mrs. Morris nodded. "Yes, I know. Jeanie used to have a coloring book like that."

She began to flip over the pages. Page one. Page three. Page five. Page seven. She hadn't noticed anything. Charles felt weak with pleasure. He licked his lips.

"Yes, they'll like them," Mrs. Morris said. "Thank you, Mr. Gibbs, for thinking of the children. I'm glad you're feeling better. They've been wanting something to do. I'll go give the paint books to them now." She went out.

Charles sighed at the exquisiteness of the moment. She was cooperating delightfully. And he'd been right, it was much better fun to do it this way.

He took off his shoes. In stockinged feet, he slid into the hall. He listened. He heard a babble of excited voices, then the rush of water in the bathroom. Lottie was saying something to Peter, something about spilling. (So typical of Lottie, the pretense of neatness. He wasn't fooled by it.) The children, it was clearing, were getting water and starting at once on their painting books.

How long would it take them to get to page six?

After supper he listened again. Mrs. Morris was ironing in the kitchen. The house was quiet except for the occasional murmur of the children's voices. Charles was keyed-up and tense, but he found he didn't mind waiting at all. There was something quite delightful in the thought of the children painting steadily ahead, while their industry brought them nearer and nearer to page six.

His hearing seemed exceptionally acute. He could hear the pages rustle as the children turned them, the weak scratch of their brushes on the paper, even the gurgle of the water as the brushes were dipped.

The moment came as he had imagined it, at the end of a long silence. Lottie gave a faint cry. A chair was pushed back. Still remembering caution, Charles ran down the hall on tiptoe to their room.

The paint book was open on the table. Both Lottie and Peter were looking at it. It must be Lottie's book, for the painting had been done with considerable care.

THE picture was even better than Charles had remembered. The Little Red Owl hung upside down, crucified through his shattered wings. The flames, the blood, the beautiful blood dripping from his eyes. And, in the background, Billy and Gwendolyn.

Charles grasped Lottie by the shoulder. Now that the time had come, he forgot what he had meant to say. He shook her. He said, "That's what happened to the Little Red Owl."

Carlotta pulled out of his grip. She faced him. She was pale, but her eyes shone. "The picture's a big lie," she said.

Charles drew in his breath. Defiance? It was impossible; he'd had the picture made so she'd be convinced.

"I'll tell you how it really was," Carlotta said. Her voice rose.

"The Little Red Owl's not hurt! When the bad Vulture Man tried to catch him, the Little Red Owl flew in his face. The Vulture Man fell down, and the fire roared up over him. Then the Little Red Owl went and saved Billy and Gwnedolyn. They got away. They're safe." She hesitated. Her breath was coming in gasps. Then she tore the picture out of the book. It left a jagged edge. Using both hands, she crumpled it up.

Oh, she thought she was a heroine! Charles caught her once more and began to shake her. She felt small and soft under his hands. Would her bones be brittle, like plant stems, or would they bend before they could break?

"You little . . . little . . . to tear a thing like that!" He hit her savagely, forgetting caution, and then again. Peter began to scream; Charles couldn't attend to both of them at once. It was almost a relief when Mrs. Morris came running in.

He was helped by dignity, pride, self-respect. He managed to listen to her tirade with his head proudly erect, and when she halted for breath he said coldly, "Are you quite through?"

But there is a price set on such severe self-control, and later he had to pay it. After Mrs. Morris had herded the children upstairs to her room for safekeeping, he sat huddled over the fire in the sitting room, shivering without being able to stop himself. His hands were shaking too much for him to be able to pick up the poker.

Why hadn't he silenced her? Charles asked himself. He could have hit her repeatedly on the mouth. He was stronger than she was. But the moment had passed. He couldn't possibly nerve himself to it now. Too late. Now Mrs. Morris was in the kitchen telephoning, calling number after number as she tried to locate Sally Gibbs.

What would happen? Well, he rather thought Sally would tell Mrs. Gibbs to take the children to some hotel and stay with them tonight. But that wasn't quite what he meant. What would happen to him?

His attention wandered. He tried to concentrate on what Mrs. Morris was saying, but gave it up after a second. His fate would be decided after all, he rather thought, not by what Mrs. Morris was saying, but by the sentences of a quite differ-

ent voice, the voice he had begun to hear within his head.

He listened. The outer world sank away through gauzy layers into a profound silence. The . . . the children. Yes. He started to get up. Then he sat down in his chair again. He took a newspaper from the table beside him. He folded it carefully into a long, many layered lath-shape. He thrust the end of the newspaper into the flames in the grate.

"WERE you scared, Lottie?" Peter asked. After their experience their mother had taken them to a psychologist who specialized in children. He had advised that they be allowed to talk if they wished, but not pressed to it. This was the first time that either one of them had referred to what had happened, even to the other one.

They had been playing earlier in the day with plasticine. Lottie pressed a blob of it out from under her fingernail before answering. "Yes," she said honestly, "when he broke the door down. Why, Peter? Weren't you?"

"Not then," her brother answered with a hint of superiority. "I thought Mrs. Morris would come for us."

"But when you saw how the hall was all on fire, Peter? He'd set it on fire behind him, so nobody could get in to us."

"Yes, I was scared then, Lottie. But you know what scared me most? It was when I saw how his face was all wet and shiny and the light from the fire shined on his face."

"*Shone,*" his sister corrected automatically. "What I minded most was when he came in the room. All the smoke and fire."

"When did you stop being scared, Lottie?"

"When I heard him whistle."

"Who whistle?" Peter asked uncertainly. "Uncle Charles?"

"Oh, Peter, don't be silly. You're older than that. You know. *Him.*"

"Oh. His whistle's pretty, isn't it?"

"Um-hum. Low and sweet and soft. Not like an owl, really. More like a dove."

"Lottie—did it really happen?"

Carlotta stared at him. "Did *what* really happen?" she demanded. "You mean, did the Little Red Owl really lead us through the smoke over to the window? And show us how to climb down the drainpipe to the rose bed? Of course he did."

"No, not that. Just because you're bigger, Lottie, you don't need to think you're the only one that knows things. I mean, did he really fly in Uncle Charles's face?"

Carlotta did not answer immediately. She went over to the window and looked out. The children's nursery was on the second floor. She could see a street lamp and a portion of the quiet street. "I didn't see him do it," she said, without turning. "But I heard the noise. And I saw Uncle Charles fall."

Mrs. Gibbs came in. "Bedtime, darlings," she said brightly. "Come along."

They were taken to the bathroom, washed, tooth-brushed, toileted. Mrs. Gibbs saw them into bed with hugs and kisses. She turned out the light. There was a silence. Then Lottie said, "If you want to, Peter, you can sleep in my bed tonight."

"All right." He crossed the room to her, skirting the play table and a couple of chairs. They snuggled together in the bed.

"Do you think we'll ever see him again?" Peter asked when they were settled. "The Little Red Owl?"

"Maybe," Lottie said thoughtfully, "maybe we would if we were scared or in trouble. Maybe he'd come for us then and help. I'll tell you, Peter. Let's try real hard to dream about him tonight. Maybe if we try real hard we can see him." Her voice was rich with longing. "Our own dear Little Red Owl."

There was a silence. Then Lottie said, "Have you still got the feather he gave you, Peter? Are you taking good care of it?"

In the darkness Peter nodded. "Don't you worry, Lottie," he said sleepily. "I've got it in a good safe place. Yes."

Date in the City Room

Two old friends keep a weird rendezvous

BY TALBOT JOHNS

HE STOOD on the door-sill of the old *Globe* city room and looked around. The place seemed about the same, though after a year's absence he seemed to see it differently—sort of all at once instead of item by item. There was a new and shiny teletype clicking monotonously in the corner, but the faded yellow bulbs with their green metal shades hanging from the ceiling still cut triangles through a perpetual haze of blue smoke. Cigarette-charred desks, crumpled wads of yellow copy-paper and the old crack in the ceiling that the owners had never fixed because the plaster had fallen on Bart Davis' head and he'd been killed the next day on a fire story—the old-looking boy in the doorway took them all in with a glance and turned to Clem, sitting at the night desk.

"Hello, Reggie," said Clem.

"It's been a long time," said Reggie.

"It has, at that," said Clem.

That was all, for a minute. It was enough, Reggie thought. Things would begin to iron themselves out in a while. No use trying to rush them.

The smoke from his cigarette curled under a lampshade and shot out in a little swirl as it hit the hot bulb. Red Mackenzie, of the twelve-to-eight shift, slouched into the city room, cursing softly because he was a couple of minutes late.

He almost collided with Reggie, but didn't give him a glance. I suppose that's what happens, thought Reggie, when you've been away as long as I have. He didn't have to look right through me, though.

"It's just a year to the day, isn't it?" said Clem, drumming noiselessly on the night desk with his big knuckles.

"That's right," said Reggie, "just a year."

"I was wondering if you'd come," said Clem.

"You knew very well I would," said Reggie. "I told you, didn't I?"

Funny thing, but it was getting colder. Red was on the phone now, getting a stick from AP on some wedding in Baltimore, and had his coat off, despite the chill. Reggie wanted to speak to Red, but decided not to. Red was a good enough guy, but probably wouldn't understand. Clem—good old fat Clem, with his thinning gray hair and his forty-year jowls—was leaning back in his chair, staring at Bart Davis' hole in the ceiling, his thumbs linked in the arm-holes of his vest as Reggie had seen them for years when he worked on the night staff. "One of Clem's boys," they used to call Reggie in the old days. One of the boys who would go through a herd of wildcats and a hundred cops to get any story that Clem wanted—until a year ago.

"We were fools, Reggie," said Clem.

"I'll say," replied Reggie.

"We should never have let her jam our lives up that way," said Clem.

"Women are poison to good newspapermen," said Reggie.

Now it was coming out, and he was glad of it. He'd worried about this for a year, and here it was, staring him right in the face. Three hundred and sixty-five nights of thinking about Clem, to whom he should have been loyal—of the girl, who knew no loyalty to anything, and of himself, too. All added up, they made this moment, right now, face to face with Clem and the whole thing ready to blow off.

All Clem said was, "We should have found some other way out of it."

"You know I felt that way, too, at the last minute," said Reggie, "when it was too late."

"Yes," said Clem, "I know."

Reggie had known that Clem would be like this, because Clem always understood. His heart warmed up in spite of his chill. He was glad he'd come—glad he'd kept this crazy date, made a year ago when neither of them thought it could be kept. No matter how hard it was, these things ought to be talked out, he thought. No matter what happened or what they'd done a year ago, he and Clem were still as close as any two men could be. Sometimes, during the past year, he'd wondered if they *would* be men when they met tonight. People can stand just so much and no more. Clem seemed the same, though. Probably he did, too.

TIME seemed to race through his brain as he stood there, six feet of curly-topped reporter, gray slouch hat on the back of his head. Time was a funny thing. For a year it had dragged until he almost went insane, waiting to come and see Clem as they'd planned it. Now, here he was and there was no time, really—just he and Clem, and Red on the phone, still getting the paragraph from Baltimore and paying no attention to either of them. No minutes or seconds in this moment—just he, Reggie, waiting for Clem, his friend, to say something.

"It wasn't really your fault, Reggie," said Clem. "She was a wild one and I was sort of a fool. None like an old one, they tell me." He laughed, and startled Reggie, because it wasn't like one of Clem's old rollicking bellows that used to clear the wires as far as Chicago. It was just a little, thin, sardonic laugh, like the wind whispering in a tenement fire-escape.

"Don't blame her too much," said Reggie. "A couple of years before she met you she and I were pretty thick. Came a time when I couldn't forget it, and neither could she."

His words seemed to come to his ears from very far away, and sounded short and clipped. How else should they sound? he wondered. He was tired. The constant clacking of the teletype got on his nerves, and he seemed unable to hold his thoughts together as well as he used to. He wandered over to the teletype to see what all the racket was about, and pulled a yard of paper out of the basket. "Famous Movie Actress Gets Fourth Divorce; Senator Promises Lower Taxes If; Orange, N. J., Bride and Groom Killed in Triple Crash. . . ." A dream world, he thought—he and Clem had the only reality—he and Clem and their problem.

". . . And I was too old, anyway. Must have been crazy." Reggie realized that Clem was still talking. Funny—they must have gotten out of tune for a minute. "You two kids—I loved you both. Should have just backed out of the whole thing. But I had to go and marry her, and try to set up housekeeping. Me, Clem Roberts, whose home is right behind this desk and always has been! Thank the Lord there were no kids. What's she doing now, Reggie?"

"I don't know," said Reggie. What did he care what she was doing?

"Don't care, either, hey kid?" Clem was more like himself now, but a little pale still. "Neither do I. It's you and me from now on!"

There it was. That was what Reggie had been waiting for. Now that he had it, now that he knew that he and Clem were as they always had been, what of it? What was left for them now? He felt tired again. Let Clem figure it out.

"You figure it out, Clem," he said. "Where do we go from here?"

"Now you're talking sense, boy," said Clem. "I don't see any reason why we can't go on as usual, and pick up right where we left off. Things are going to be different—don't kid yourself on that—because we're different. We have to be, after"—he made a funny, quick motion with his hand—"all that. But we're still pals, we've got more sense than we used to have, and that's that."

They used to call him, the boys that didn't like him—and there were plenty who didn't, though they slaved for him—"That's That" Roberts.

Clem pulled his big antique watch out of his vest pocket, looked at it and started to pull on his coat. Then he reached for the phone.

"Shoot me up a morning final!" he barked in a voice that didn't sound like his at all. Red Mackenzie, batting out the Baltimore story on his typewriter, looked around suddenly as if he'd heard Clem for the first time, and then turned back to his pecking with a puzzled look on his face.

A boy brought the paper in, tossed it on the desk, and ran out again without saying a word. Reggie leaned over with his fists on the desk top, and watched Clem turn to page three.

"You didn't make front page, Reggie," said Clem. "Bad luck to the end."

"O. K. with me," said Reggie. He leaned over further to see the half-column story, and his coat sleeve slipped up on his arm.

"Bad burn you have there," said Clem.

"Doesn't hurt now," said Reggie, and they read the story together.

PAYS WITH LIFE FOR CRIME ON MURDER ANNIVERSARY

Ossining, N. Y., July 26: At two minutes past midnight tonight Reginald J. Fallon, New York *Globe* reporter, went calmly to the electric chair for the murder by shooting a year ago today of his city editor, Clement J. Roberts of White Plains, N. Y. Witnesses marveled at the composure of the condemned man, who seemed to welcome . . .

"That's that," said Clem. "Let's go."

They walked out of the city room arm in arm, and the clock said a quarter after twelve.

JULES DE GRANDIN *said it was too bad youth was wasted on those too young to appreciate it!*

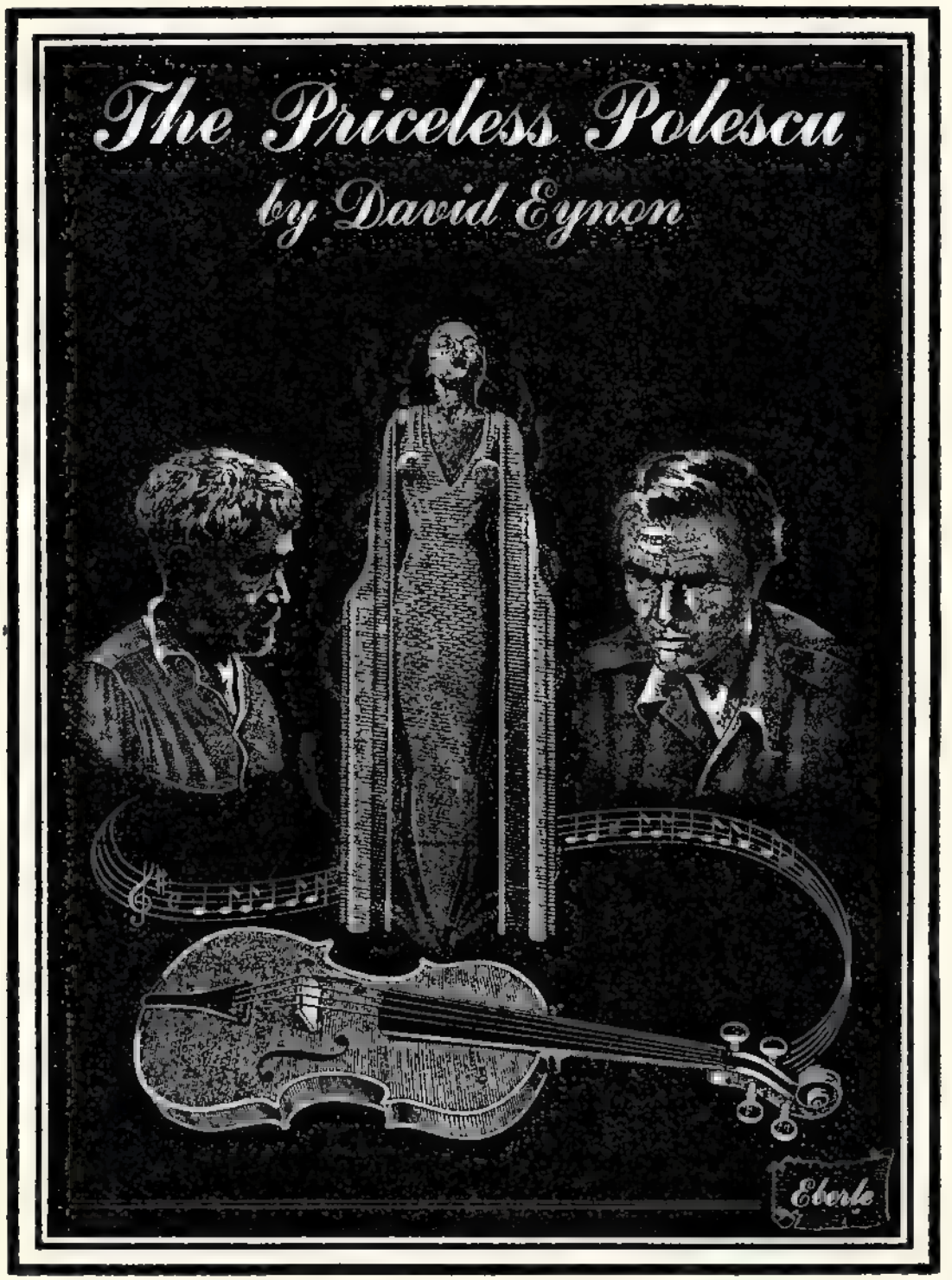
"THE RING OF BASTET"

By SEABURY QUINN

in the next WEIRD TALES

The Priceless Polescu

by David Eymon



"YOU want a violin?" asked the little man with the mustache. "A really fine violin?"

The young man across the table nodded slowly, definitely. In the background the orchestra of the Nerevsky played a gentle Tizagne tcharda. Smoke swirled slowly among the soft spoken drinkers in the cafe. From their seats in the bistro on the Place du Terte the two men could look out over

. . . The violin almost seemed to play itself—
as if it had a soul. Whose soul?

Paris, where the blinking lights seemed to be in rhythm with the wild gypsy music.

"It is not often," said the little man," that such a young person can afford a truly fine instrument."

"I have been fortunate," said the boy self-consciously.

"You have indeed," said the dealer. "To have talent in one's youth is not unusual. But to have wealth also—that is rare."

The young man blushed. "That is what I want," he said, looking down at his wine glass. "A rare violin. The best that I can find."

The dealer twirled his glass thoughtfully for several minutes, then spoke deliberately. "I could offer you many such," he said. "A Guarnerius. A sound Amati. Even a Stradavari—an instrument whose bittersweet tone would haunt you," he said, gesturing with his hand.

"Do you know what the gypsies say of a violin?" the dealer asked suddenly, looking over his shoulder into the cafe. "Their legend says it is a soul imprisoned in wood—a soul that is let out when the violin is played." The sound of the orchestra filled the silence between the two men.

"Still," the dealer added, raising an eyebrow and looking sharply at the young man, "I think you want something more."

"More?" asked the boy. "What more can there be—beyond a Strad?"

"Tell me," said the dealer, glancing back into the depths of the cafe, "where do you hear the violin played as nowhere else? Not on the concert stages, understand, but with a natural, untrained genius?"

"The gypsies?" asked the boy, surprised but understanding. "You would have me buy a gypsy violin."

The dealer chuckled and shook his head. "You can buy a gypsy's wife, if you like—or his mother. But he will never sell his horse or his violin."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Where," said the dealer, fingering his glass, "do you suppose the gypsies get *their* violins?"

"Buy them—make them, I suppose."

"No," said the dealer. "Not steal them, either. In Hungary, Rumania, anywhere along the provinces of central Europe, are made such violins as nowhere else. Now or ever."

"Then you would have me go there?" asked the boy incredulously.

"Precisely, mon enfant."

"But to whom? And in what spot?"

"There is a small village beyond Budapest, and a blind violin maker called Polescu—a man I have never met, but for whom I have the most profound respect." The dealer finished his wine and sat the glass on the marble table top.

"But what will he want?" asked the boy. "What price is there for such an instrument as you describe?"

The dealer stood up and lighted a cigarette. He blew the smoke slowly through his nostrils and shrugged a shoulder. "Who knows what he will ask?" Then he bowed to the boy and offered his hand. "Only be sure," he said in parting "that he does not charge you too much."

IN SZENTES, on the Tisza River, life flowed slowly even for the Balkans. The willows bent low over the river and bowed to each other across the water. Flocks of geese waddled along the dusty road, driven carelessly by barefoot peasant boys. Sheep, guided by a quick-witted dog, spilled from the road into thick green grass while their shepard lolled beneath a gnarled tree, playing ancient tunes on a crude flute.

The sunlight, golden and thick as Normandy cider, shot through the windows of the Inn and silhouetted a shapeless man playing a sombre, unnamable tune, which floated from his zither cut across the road on which shawled women filed past from

Heading by Joseph Eberle

work. A breeze slipped by, tiptoeing gently to avoid stirring up the wine-like air.

The hut of Anton Polescu, the blind violin maker, crouched on the edge of the river among the willows at the edge of town. It was nearly dark as the young man approached, but still the house remained unlighted. As he came down the footpath the willows whispered to each other hastily and the door opened silently. He stood facing an old man with gnarled hands and a deeply lined, sightless face.

"Come in," said Anton. "You will find a candle by the fireplace, if you wish light."

The young man, startled, did as he was told. When the candle sprang into life he saw the old man huddled over a bench at the far end of the room. The rough stone floor was littered with fine wood shavings. The whitewashed walls were hung with violin patterns and from the rafters dangled a hundred violins, in a hundred stages of completion.

"You want a violin?" asked Anton, groping among the array of tools on his bench.

"Yes," said the boy. "A violin."

"Of course," said the craftsman, chortling. "Why else would anyone come to Blind Anton."

"Tell me, sir," asked the boy, "is it true—?"

"Is it true that I make instruments that laugh like champagne? Cry like dying lovers?" said Anton, smiling softly. "Yes, yes, it is true—but they are expensive."

"I will be glad to pay," said the boy anxiously. "Anything you want."

"They are quite expensive," Anton warned. "Take off your shirt," he commanded.

The boy bared himself to the waist and watched, fascinated, as Anton scuttled across the worn stones of the floor. The violin maker's strong sensitive hands made the boy tremble as they felt slowly over his arms and shoulders. Anton went slowly, carefully, repeating several times to memorize the contours of the young man's limbs. He palpated the boy's fingers then let his hand fall.

"Your name?" Anton asked sharply, turning back to his bench.

"Paul," said the boy. "Paul Baron."

"You shall have your violin, Paul," said Anton, with a crooked smile. "A violin you will never part with."

"I . . . I shall be very grateful," said Paul.

"But there is more," said Anton.

"Oh, yes, the price," said Paul.

"No, not the price. That I will decide when the instrument is finished," Anton said, picking up a razor sharp knife. "No, you must come here each evening, as I carve, and tell me what you want in this violin." He cut a thin slice from a loaf of black bread on his bench and nibbled at it slowly.

"What I want?" asked Paul, confused.

"Of course," explained Anton. "A violin is like a human being. It has personality—a soul. You must tell me, a little each night, of what you want in your instrument."

"All right," said Paul, "I will come. Each night, as you wish. How long will it take?"

"A month," said Anton. "It will take a month."

"And the price?"

"Will be decided in a month," said Anton.

"But if I should not be able to pay it?"

Anton laughed as he showed the boy to the door. "Then you can pay me a little at a time—even if it takes you your whole life."

Before Paul knew it the door was closed and the candles had been snuffed out. He stood and tried to recall the direction he had come from. Then, remembering, he turned to seek the Inn at the village.

Once in bed in his room at the Inn Paul could hardly sleep. His good luck, the words of the Parisian violin dealer, the touch of Anton's hands kept rushing through his brain. The dealer was right, Paul thought. Anton had hands more sensitive than anyone on earth. And who could judge the tone of violins better than a blind man? Yes, Paul thought, he will make me a truly wondesful instrument. Paul dropped off to sleep with visions of his new violin soaring through his mind.

"Come, get up," said a soft, melodius voice. "You will be late for breakfast,"

Paul rolled over in bed and blinked up at a young girl with merry, brown eyes, who was drawing back the shutters. Her tanned arms moved with swift competence as she poured water into the washbowl and laid out fresh towels.

"Yes, you, sleepyhead," she said, flashing a smile at Paul, who was rubbing his eyes.

"All right, all right," he grinned. "You needn't be merciless about it."

"Oh, no," she replied, laughing, "I am very merciful—for if you don't hurry, your breakfast will be cruelly cold." Then she flounced out of the room and left him to dress.

Paul saw her again at breakfast. She confided, laughingly, that her name was Anyeta. Late in the afternoon he heard her singing as she strode towards the river with the wash. At dinner she promised to take a walk with him—a very short walk—when he came back from Anton's.

There was a light showing in Anton's hut that evening.

"I sometimes forget that other people are not used to the dark," Anton explained when Paul entered the low ceilinged room. The old man hobbled over to his bench and picked up the rough, unfinished back of a violin.

"Now tell me," he said, as he started to carve with strong, sweeping strokes, "of your violin."

"Well," said Paul hesitantly, "I want one that will laugh."

"It would be a strange violin that didn't laugh," said Anton. "But laugh how?"

"Like . . . like a young girl in the morning," said Paul, blushing.

"Yes, yes, go on," said Anton insistently. "What else?"

"And sing," said Paul, warming up to the idea and talking as if to himself. "Sing like a maiden going down to the river—softly, unconsciously."

"Yes," said Anton, eagerly. "That is what I must know."

AS THEY went on Paul found himself thinking more and more of Anyeta. At the end of an hour the pile of fine wood shavings at Anton's feet had grown greatly. Finally the old man put down the violin back and walked over to snuff out the candles.

"Enough for tonight," he said. "You have done well, very well."

"Then I will see you tomorrow evening?" asked Paul.

"At eight," said Anton, opening the door.

Paul hurried off across the fields to the bend in the river where the village women did their washing. He stood in the darkness for several seconds, unable to make out distinctly the dim shapes around him.

"Here I am," laughed Anyeta, "over by the cross."

Paul turned and saw the dim outlines of a large wooden shrine, slightly tilted against the clear night sky. A shadow detached itself from the base and moved slowly towards him.

"You were praying?" asked Paul.

"A little," Anyeta confessed.

"For whom?" Paul asked, emboldened by the darkness.

"For you," Anyeta said shyly, "that you did not come to harm."

"For me?" Paul asked, flushing in the darkness. "I am in no danger."

"Perhaps not," Anyeta said doubtfully. "But you have been at Blind Anton's. The people in the village fear him."

"Old Anton?" But surely he's harmless," said Paul. "It's merely peasant superstition. Is it true that the people here believe in vampires?"

"A bit, perhaps," said Anyeta. "But there are other things, besides blood. You will be careful?" she asked earnestly, taking Paul's hand.

"Nonsense," said Paul. "Come, we must be back soon or your mother will be angry."

On the walk to the Inn neither of them spoke, but as they walked slowly together, stopping occasionally to listen to the night birds or look up at the stars, Paul found himself thinking of music—music he would one day write for his new violin.

For a month each day was nearly the same. Paul's walks with Anyeta became longer, perhaps, and covered less distance.

And his talks with Anton began to center more directly on a merry-eyed girl, skipping through the grass to the river's edge, or crying softly for unknown sorrows under the night sky. And the music—music that represented Paul's feeling for Anyeta—had not crystalized in his mind. Often he caught a snatch of the theme—sometimes at breakfast when the sunlight streamed through the windows cut in the thick walls of the Inn, sometimes in the evening among the willows as the river murmured softly to itself.

FOR a month Paul visited Anton's hut nightly, sitting and talking to the blind man as he carved the seasoned wood. Occasionally the boy would become hesitant and Anton would urge him on.

"You must not be afraid," Anton said gently, "to tell me what you really want."

"But sometime," said Paul vacantly, "I become confused, I get mixed up with the violin and, and——"

"A woman is much like a violin," said Anton sagely. "Each has its foibles, its mysteries."

Paul blushed and stammered. "I didn't mean——"

"And a woman," Anton went on, "a woman must be handled delicately—must be played on with a master's touch."

"But with a girl—words——"

"Why not music?" asked Anton.

Paul left the hut, turning Anton's words over in his mind. When he met Anyeta at the shrine she seemed a bit more quiet than usual. Nothing great, merely the suggestion of distance. She seemed to be looking at the sky more, and when Paul took her hand she clasped his absently.

"She waits for me to speak," he thought, desperately trying to find words he would not be afraid to say. As they parted at the door of the Inn she accepted his kiss, sighing gently, smiled once and then disappeared into the shadows.

The darkness closed in around him and Paul felt suddenly alone and empty. Anton's words came out of the night, as clearly as if spoken aloud. "Why not music?" Paul groped for the elusive theme in his mind as he made his way up the darkened stairs to bed.

When the last night arrived Paul went early to Anton's hut and found a light burning as usual.

The old violin maker was sitting before the fire, putting the final polish on a superb instrument. He handled it tenderly, like a new child, and when he handed it to Paul his voice was eager.

"Play," he said eagerly, "play what ever is in your heart."

Paul took the violin reverently and drew the bow gently across it. The instrument came to life in his hands. As he played the music in his mind came into focus—the theme for Anyeta. The violin played as if it knew the music by heart. Paul could see her eyes smiling at him, with an odd sadness.

For an hour he played, as Anton sat before the fire and nodded the time. The boy was hypnotized by the tone and range of the piece. And the violin seemed to play itself as no human hand could have played it, as if indeed it were a gypsy violin, in which the legend said a soul was imprisoned. When Paul had explored all the possibilities of the theme and the music ran out, he was dizzy, drunk with the tone of his instrument.

"Well—?" said Anton expectantly.

"There are no words," said Paul. "You have heard the music—what more can one say? Only it laughs a bit sadly."

"You are right," said Anton, smiling to himself. "When you are older you will see that laughing and crying are nearly the same."

"And the price?" asked Paul.

"I will think it over," said Anton. "I think it better you pay me gradually—a little each day."

"But if I leave, how can you be sure of me?" asked Paul.

"You will pay," said Anton definitely, dismissing the matter with a smile.

PAUL thanked the blind man many times, and then tucked the violin carefully under his arm and started eagerly for the shrine.

Surely, in the darkness, with his wonderful violin, Paul could say with his music what he could not say otherwise. Anyeta would understand then, without clumsy words.

As he approached the river's edge he saw the light of torches reflected in the water. The cross stood out starkly against the firelight and a shadowy group of figures gathered around the base of the crucifix.

PAUL pushed towards the group until he faced Anyeta's mother.

"It is better that you do not go on," she said sadly, with tear-filled eyes. "She has left you."

"Anyeta? But—but what happened? Is she hurt?"

"She is dead," said the mother.

"But how? When?"

"How?" said the mother. "Who can say? She died as if in her sleep—at the foot of the cross, thank God."

"But why, why?" asked Paul desperately.

"Why? Why does anyone die?" said the mother sadly. "Something has taken her soul," she said angrily throwing a black look through the darkness towards Anton's hut.

Paul took his violin and left for Paris. And London, and every capitol of the world —where his music brought him as much fame as his playing. But his best composition, the one that started him to success, was the one he least liked to play, the "Anyeta Etude." When Paul played it himself people got the strange illusion of seeing a merry-eyed, brown-skinned girl smiling, just a bit sadly. It was a most unusual effect, startling the connoisseurs and guaranteeing Paul's success with the critics.

But this was not really extraordinary, for the "Anyeta Etude" was inspired music—and it was played on a very expensive violin.

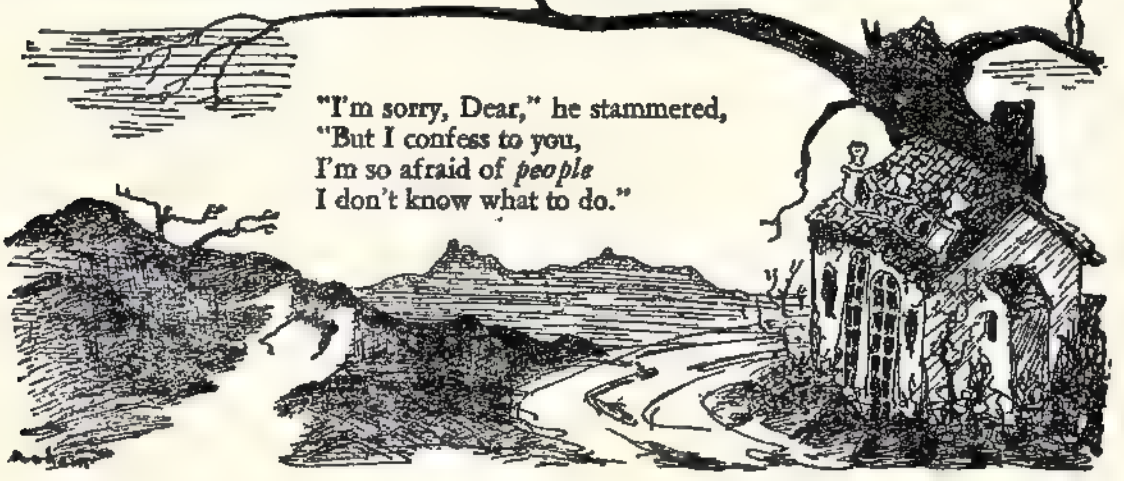
The Haunted Ghost

by Clarence Edwin Flynn

A GHOST came running homeward
From wandering on the moor,
His hands so weak from terror
He couldn't bolt the door.

"Heavens, what is the matter?"
His wondering wife began.
Through chattering teeth he managed
To say, "I met a *man*."

"I'm sorry, Dear," he stammered,
"But I confess to you,
I'm so afraid of *people*
I don't know what to do."



Even the sky was a satanic scarlet . . .

Heading by Charles Kennedy

Amok!

by Harold Lawlor

It promised to be an evil night, but how evil I didn't dream.

I cast an anxious glance at the sullen sky as I left my car and hurried up the walk leading to the rectory. When Harriet opened the door to me, I knew at once that something was terribly wrong. Her face, tear-streaked and swollen, confirmed the uneasy suspicions I'd entertained ever since hearing the odd note in Paul's voice when he'd telephoned me after dinner a half hour before, asking me to come over.

Harriet took my raincoat and hat without even murmuring a greeting and hung them in the hall closet. Her manner was very strange, quite unlike her usual bustling cheerful middle-aged self. She kept her head averted from my surprised gaze and her eyes downcast as she said tonelessly, "Paul's in his study."

I touched her arm gently. "Harriet, what's the matter?"

"Oh, Steve, I—" She burst into tears, shook her head dumbly. So unstrung were her nerves, so little control had she over her muscles, that she reeled a little drunkenly as she turned away from me and hurried to the stairs. I stood there uneasily, watching her ascend until she reached the landing and disappeared from my sight.

Troubled, I went down the narrow hall then alongside the stairs until I came to Paul's study under the landing. I knocked on the closed walnut door.

"It's Steve, Paul."

"Oh, come in!"

I found him behind his desk, sunk in

gloom, plucking nervously at his lower lip. But my entry served to rouse him somewhat from his obviously troubled meditations. He rose, and held out his hand. "It was good of you to come so promptly, Steve. Sit down, sit down."

His voice seemed to lack its usual confident resonance.

Paul is a minister, and we've been friends ever since high-school days. His physical appearance always seemed to me to approach the ideal for his calling. Tall and lean, he had dark hair dramatically streaked with silver, and fine dark eyes glowing zealously in his thin ascetic face.

Harriet worshipped him.

After shaking hands with me, his had fallen listlessly to the Bible on the desk before him. His eyes haunted, he patted the book now with a gesture that was a caress.

"I'm a man of God," he said, speaking as if he were continuing an interrupted conversation he had been having with me, "but a failure as a father. I seek to show others the Light, but I can't touch the heart of my own son. A failure, Steve. A failure."

My heart sank. This was what I had feared—that the trouble, whatever it was, concerned Donald, their only son. I've always been fond of the boy, though I should call him a boy no longer, I suppose, now that he is nineteen. How quickly the years pass! A handsome moody lad, he had been ever rebellious of authority, as ministers' sons so often are.

But he had returned my affection, I knew. Indeed, there were times when I'd thought he felt himself much closer to me than he ever did to his own parents. Simple people and good, they expected of him a perfection that was impossibly hard on him. Never wild or unruly, any hint of normal mischievousness in him seemed to them the first fatal steps on the primrose path.

I'd acted as a buffer between them and him for so long. There'd been a crisis when they discovered the first limp package of cigarettes in his pocket; another when they'd found in his room a ticket stub from a gay and mildly naughty musical comedy (which I'd seen twice myself!) I'd been called in often to pour oil on troubled waters, dissimulating so well as I might my tolerant amusement at the parents' unworldliness, and my affectionate sympathy for the harassed youth.

But, somehow, I knew this time was different.

"TELL me, Paul," I said now. "If I can help—"

Instead of answering, he rose. "Come," he said. "It's better that you should see for yourself. I can't bring myself—"

He broke off, and led me to the stairs. We went upstairs, and passed Harriet's closed door. At the sound of her muted sobbing, Paul winced as if he'd been struck. He hesitated, but didn't go in. We went down the neat threadbare carpet to Donald's large room at the back of the rectory. Paul closed the door behind us, switched on the lights, and I peered around looking for Donald.

He wasn't in the room as I'd expected, and when I raised inquiring eyebrows at Paul, he said sadly, "Donald has left home."

That startled me. I shouldn't have dreamed that things would reach such a serious pass between them. "But—why?"

Paul motioned me to come over to Donald's desk, a battered walnut table-top affair, its top crowded with a litter of books and papers. There were more books on a long shelf on the wall above the desk.

"Look at those!" Paul commanded me.

I took my horn-rimmed glasses from my pocket and pushed them on my nose. Leaning over the desk, I peered curiously at the titles printed on the book-spines. Startled at what I read, I dropped my glance next to the desk-top, and examined the books and papers there, while Paul waited quietly.

I was shocked. And I could well imagine the effect their discovery must have had on Paul and Harriet.

There were books on demonology. There were others containing gross and revolting descriptions of the Great and Little Sabbaths and the Black Mass, written in the most explicit terms. There were diagrams and masses of notes in Paul's own handwriting, which seemed to me far worse, dealing as

they did with subjects and theories better left unstated here.

I felt a sickness in my throat, an inability for the first time to understand or sympathize with Donald. He had always been a healthy-minded lad. But in such quantities as these, the books and papers were indicative of an abnormal absorption in the subjects, rather than an idle curiosity that anybody might evince.

I couldn't hide my distaste.

I removed my glasses soberly and looked at Paul. "How long has this been going on?"

He shrugged hopelessly. "We don't know. He must have been smuggling the books into the house, probably for some time, keeping them well hidden some place until now. His mother discovered them only yesterday, and told me at once, of course. As you can imagine, we were terribly shocked and heart-sick.

"When he came in, I taxed him with our findings. I was so upset, perhaps I went about it in the wrong way, for I met only with defiance. He refused to explain himself. He said we would never understand, that we'd never made any attempt to understand him, that we'd always preferred to think the worst of him.

"There was—well, a scene. I'm afraid I lost my temper. I—so great was my wrath, that I even struck him." Paul hung his head in shame. "He left the house in a fury."

"And he hasn't returned? You don't even know where he is?"

"Oh, yes." Paul raised his head, rubbed his eyes wearily. "He came back this morning, for some of his books and papers. I had meant to destroy them. I should have withheld them, at least, but I wasn't here. I was out on parish duties."

"And he still made no explanation of all this?" My gesture swept the littered desk.

"None. He told his mother that when he succeeded in what he meant to do, we would understand then how greatly we had misjudged him. Harriet said he seemed strangely exalted and almost febrilely nervous. She tried to keep him here until my return, but he refused to listen to her. But he didn't want her to worry unnecessarily, he said. He assured her that he was all right. He was living in a trailer he'd rented in a camp on the Old Mill Road, a mile or so west of its intersection with Route B.

"I went out there at once to demand that he come home. But he refused to open the door of his trailer, or even to speak to me. I was out there the better part of the day, pleading as best I could through the closed door. But what could I do? I was helpless. I couldn't create a commotion by trying to break in, for I didn't want an open scandal made of this. In the end, I was forced to give up and come home.

"And then I thought of you, for your influence with him has always been great."

I waited, knowing what was coming.

"Will you go out there, Steve?" Paul went on. "Talk to him, reason with him if you can? I'm sure he'll see you. And if, as we fear, his mind has broken down, will you take steps to have him put away? Or at least see to it that he harms neither himself nor anybody else? His mother and I can't bring ourselves to take such action. You're our only hope."

How could I refuse?

I FOUND my raincoat and hat and left the house without seeing Harriet again.

It was not yet raining as I got into my car, but thunder grumbled tentatively like a querulous old man far to the northwest, and little veins of lightning began threading the black sky. Perhaps because of atmospheric conditions, there was a strange hush over everything and all sounds were muted.

I'd encountered just such mysterious stillness near Albuquerque on a night drive through New Mexico long ago. This was no Land of Enchantment. Here were no dark brooding mesas looming on the horizon. But the eerie ominous quiet that had struck an atavistic chill to my spine then was a sensation I was not happy to feel repeated now.

I was heart-sick as I drove out of the city. My wife died long ago within a year of our marriage, and I've never re-married. Donald held the place in my affections of the son I've never had. His parents could grieve no more now than I. I was hopeless of really

accomplishing anything, for I feared above all that Donald was insane. This was all so grotesquely unlike him. Insanity could be the only explanation for his behavior.

I had no trouble finding the trailer-camp in which he had said he was living. It was comparatively new, and the only one in that particular locality. I stopped at the little office just inside the stucco pillars that marked the entrance.

A stout jovial man came out when he saw my headlights.

"Can I help you?" he asked. "I'm Dick McLean, the owner."

"I'm looking for a Donald Armstrong," I said. "He moved in here yesterday, or so I was told."

Did his face cloud at mention of Donald's name, did some of his affability fade? Or did I only imagine it?

"Oh, yes," he said. "You'll find him parked in space 22. The last trailer on your left, 'way down." He hesitated. "Uh, is that young man all right?"

"Of course. I've known him and his family for years. His father is a minister. What do you mean?"

"No offense, no offense!" McLean said hastily. "But something funny happened last night. I had him parked in space 9 at first, and some of his neighbors complained. There was a funny red glow coming from his trailer, and they thought it was on fire. And then they said they heard strange howlings coming from it.

"Well, I went down there and knocked, and it was a long time before the young fellow came to the door. And when he did come at last, he didn't invite me in. I thought that was kind of odd, for we're a friendly lot here. Anyway, I told him of the complaints, and he said he was sorry but he'd been trying to hook up a small television set and had trouble with it."

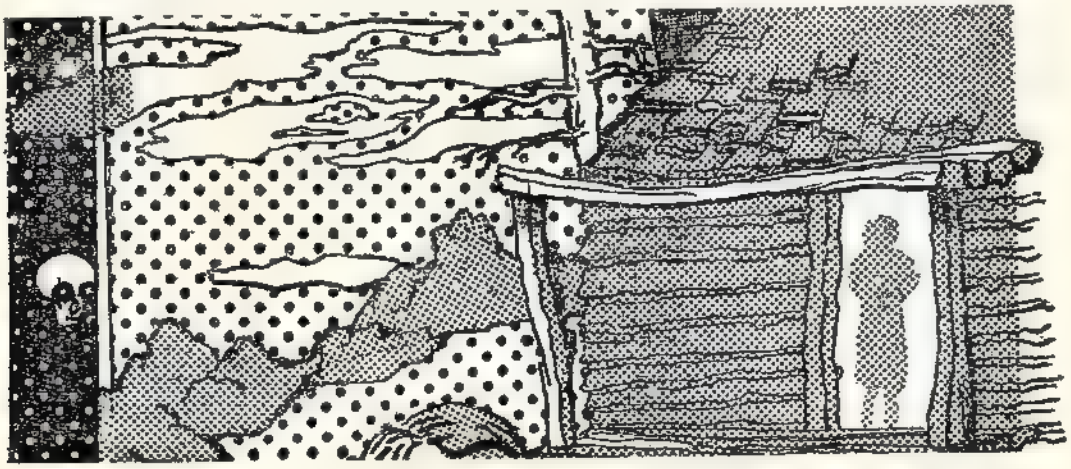
"What was so wrong about that?" I asked.

McLean looked uncomfortable. "Well, this morning he asked to be removed to a space farther away from the others. After parking him in the new spot I was in his trailer with a spirit level, but I didn't see any sign of a television set. Of course, he might have left it somewhere to be repaired, though it was still pretty early in the morning. However, if you say he's all right—" He broke off, stepped back from my car to motion me on with a friendly wave of his hand. "Going to be a bad night," he called in farewell.

I noticed for the first time that the wind was rising, whipping the tops of the trees that dotted the camp. "Yes, it looks like it."

As the camp was still new, there were only a dozen or so trailers scattered about. Most of them were huddled near the office, convenient to the shower rooms. I drove down the gravel road past several of them. Some were dark, others lighted, looking cozy and home-like in the gloom.

IF DONALD had wanted privacy primarily, he'd been given it. The trailer in which he was living was many, many yards removed from its nearest neighbor. It was



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placed near a winding brook at the far end of the trailer camp, almost obscured by the drooping fronds of two great green willow trees, thrashing wildly now in the rising wind.

I was glad to see a light in the trailer. I parked my car and walked over to knock on the door, hoping I wouldn't have to waste any great time in argument with him to gain admittance, for the thunder was louder now, and the wind approaching gale proportions, whipping my raincoat about me and forcing me to duck and shield my face with my arms to escape the willow tree's lashing branches.

The door opened a crack at my first knock.

"It's Steve, Don. Let me in."

I'd expected argument, but I think he was really glad to see me. He certainly made no attempt to bar my entrance, but instead he stretched out his hand to aid me up the step.

Inside, when the door had closed behind me, I looked about curiously. It was the first time I'd ever been in a trailer. I found myself in a small living room, perhaps eight feet square. To my left, in the center of the trailer, was a compact galley, and beyond that, in the rear, a bedroom.

"Sit down," Donald urged me.

I didn't remove my coat. Holding my hat in my hand, I sat on the studio couch that stretched across the front end of the trailer. Opposite the entrance door, a gate-leg table held an assortment of books and papers, low black glass candlesticks bearing black candles, and an array of jars and tubes and phials containing I knew not what. Dominating all was a huge crystal ball, like a goldfish bowl inverted and mounted on a black teakwood base.

Except for the oil-heater next to the door, whatever other furniture the room had held had been removed, and the black linoleum floor was bare.

I turned my attention to Donald.

Donald resembled his father, but lacked Paul's air of asceticism. He was a little above the average height and well-proportioned, with soot-black curly hair and dark eyes that seem to dominate and

illuminate his handsome face. He was wearing a wine-red brocaded dressing-robe belted about his narrow waist and coming halfway down on his bare legs. He wore no socks or slippers on his naked feet.

He came over and sat beside me on the couch, eyeing me expectantly. I hardly knew where to begin.

When the silence became uncomfortable, I said at last, "I was afraid you wouldn't let me in."

He frowned slightly. "You've been talking to Dad, I suppose."

I nodded.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I'm glad to see you, Steve. I wouldn't let Dad in, but you're different. I could always talk to you. You understand—or try to, at least. But I could never talk to Dad. Or Mother, either."

"You're breaking their hearts, Don."

I was glad to see him wince. He wasn't entirely indifferent, then, to their suffering, or entirely obsessed with this strange new interest of his.

But he only said, "I'm sorry. I have to do what I think is right."

"*Right!*" I stared at him. "Demonology! Scatology! Vileness of every description! And you call it right?"

He had a faint smile for my indignation. "Oh, I know how it must seem to you, learning of it for the first time. But I've grown so accustomed myself—This isn't exactly new to me, you know. I've been studying for five years. There's been so much to learn."

His eyes narrowed as he looked off into space, remembering. I waited, studying him. His manner was odd, and he appeared to be highly nervous. But I no longer feared for his sanity. It didn't seem to me that his mind was affected so much as that he was obsessed with a single idea. Mistaken he might be, but certainly sane. I felt some relief.

One reasonable explanation for his behavior occurred to me, and I voiced it now.

"If you're planning to write a history of the subject," I said, "why not tell your father? Distasteful he might find it, but at least understandable. As it is—"

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Don smiled again. "I'm not planning to write a book. And I can't tell Dad what I mean to do, for he is a man with a fixed idea. He thinks he can save the world by fighting along with the powers of good. He can't be blamed for thinking so, for it has been his life. But I know how wrong he is. I know better."

I stirred uncomfortably. His eyes searched my face. He said softly, "I wonder how much I can tell even you."

What else could I say but, "Everything, Don. You know I'll make an effort to understand."

"Well, I have a theory," he said. He looked away. His eyes focussed unseeingly on nothing at all as he concentrated. "A theory I've held for a long time that demons were the cause of all the world's ills. That if they were imprisoned and thus rendered innocuous, mankind could then go on to its glorious destiny, whatever it might be, so long withheld by the power of the forces of evil. But first, of course, they must be summoned up from outer darkness."

Thunder boomed then as if to underline his words. I shivered, reluctantly returning to my first idea that he was insane.

His voice dropped low. He was muttering names that I had never heard, names to send an insidious chill creeping down the spine.

"The minor ones first," he muttered. "Acham, Alrinach, Alocer and Any. Anamalech, Andras, Aquiel. Baal, Bechard, Bechet, Behemoth, Bucon—" He broke off, turned a fanatic's rapt dark eyes on me. His voice rose. "And then the great ones, the princes of darkness Beelzebub, Samael, Puthin, Asmodeus, Belial, Lucifer and Satan. But later, later. When I've learned more. When I dare more. When I've gained the strength."

He stopped, rubbed his forehead, seemed to come from a great distance. He looked at me, and my expression must have been self-revelatory.

"You think I'm crazy," he said hopelessly.

"Donald, this is preposterous! I won't even argue the possibility or probability of all this. You're forgetting one thing. The

great thing. No good can come of evil. And your crazy dream hinges on unleashing evil."

"That isn't true!" he cried. "You sound like Dad! I'd unleash evil only to restrain it. Good *can* come of it. Think, Steve! No more death, nor sickness, nor poverty! No more war, nor tragic accidents, nor cruelty! No more grief, nor fear, nor hatred! No more—*evil!*"

"A madman's dream! You're ridiculous! Why do I argue with you? You can't succeed!"

And then he startled me.

He said quietly, "I have succeeded."

The conviction in his voice chilled me.

He cocked his head, listened to the approaching storm. "Tonight you shall watch. Conditions should be favorable, and there will be others who shall come at my bidding. But hear this, Steve. I have succeeded. I've learned at last how to summon up evil spirits from the darkness in which they dwell. I have already imprisoned the demon, Acham!"

He was insane! Insane!

DONALD left my side. I continued to sit there in an agony of ineffectualness, powerless to move, wondering how best to deal with the situation, knowing in my heart that I was already defeated.

How convey the grief occasioned by the knowledge that a mind has crumbled? How express the sorrow caused by the dissolution of someone for whom one has cared?

Donald moved about. I watched him helplessly, with apathetic eyes.

He took the crystal globe from the table, set it on the floor, went to great pains to center it carefully. Taking the five black candles and candlesticks next, he placed these at five points around the crystal ball in the form of a pentagram. Next he set a black basalt bowl on the floor, surrounding it by a convoy of the jars and phials and smaller bowls whose contents I did not know.

He paid no attention to me the while he did this. Nor subsequently.

When all was in readiness and arranged to his satisfaction, he touched a match to

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each taper and switched off the electric lights. The room seemed plunged into darkness at first, but in seconds the five wavering candle-flames caught, dispelled some of the gloom.

My eyes adjusted to the dimmer light.

The storm was nearer now. Thunder rolled and boomed incessantly and unmercifully, and the interior of the trailer alternately lightened and darkened with the lightning that flashed wildly at intervals.

Donald stood across the living room from me with his back to the galley. The crystal ball on the floor was centered between us. As I watched, he removed his robe, tossed it aside.

Too stunned to protest or intervene I sat there futilely.

He sat down on the floor now, cross-legged, tailor-fashion. Uncapping a jar, he dipped his fingers into its contents, began smearing his naked young body with a foetid unguent. The trailer reeked of the stench. Disgusted I shrank back still farther, averted my head, but not my eyes, in a vain attempt to escape inhaling the fumes.

HE WAS muttering now in some language that I could not identify. It seemed to be an alien, a long-forgotten tongue. He mouthed a theme constantly repeated. As he poured liquids and powders from their various containers into the black basalt bowl, the fugue of his muttering grew louder, the accent more vehement.

Fumes and vapors began slowly arising from the basalt bowl filling the trailer with their noxious odors, dimming the candles with languorously eddying smoke.

A faint red glow began to emanate from the crystal ball on its teakwood stand.

Sweat beaded Donald's forehead. Veins stood out on his neck, his dark eyes distended exopthalmically. His whole body stiffened with the intensity of his concentration, and, shiny with oil as it was, reflected pin-points of light from the candles like a mirror of polished bronze.

Slowly the red glow strengthened. The crystal ball caught my gaze again, held it ineluctably. Something was swirling within it, forming, breaking up, re-forming.

I could feel the sweat break out all over me, the chords on my neck tighten with terror as the thing coagulated and held its form, foetus-like.

It was violently red, indescribably evil and horrid, swirling about angrily seeking escape.

Its malevolent ranine eyes fell on me, and its threadlike lips drew back in a snarl, revealing teeth like needles, a forked tongue darting restlessly.

I shrank back still farther against the cushions. Donald's voice mounted eerily.

And then with a crash and a spitting of leaden rain against the windows and metal roof of the trailer, the storm broke.

It broke a spell. The spell that held me prisoner.

MY HOARSE terrified shout cut across Donald's mounting, ecstatic mouthings. I got to my feet somehow. I made no attempt to stop him. I sought only escape from a panic that was intolerable. I ran past the imprisoned horror on the middle of the floor. I wrenched open the door.

Donald didn't even notice my going. I heard his voice rising ever more shrilly. The language had changed. I understood for the first time what it was that he was screaming.

"Come, Alzinach! Alocer! Come!"

I slammed the door behind me on that dread in the trailer. Raced to my car. Roared from the camp.

A MILE down the highway I stopped and got out and was sick at the side of the car. I tried by an effort of will to quiet the frenzied beating of my heart. But in all that welter of confusion and horror and sickness my mind must have functioned after a fashion. I knew what I must do. This was beyond me. This called for the aid of a man of God.

I raced to the rectory, roused Paul from his study, bade him bring Bible and crucifix. He could understand nothing of my incoherent attempts at explanation, but his white face reflected my terror.

Spray splashed wildly from under the car's wheels as I drove recklessly back to

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the trailer camp, hoping we'd be in time. But long before we reached it, we were forewarned. The sky glowed redly above it, a satanic scarlet visible for miles in the blackness of the surrounding night.

I swung the car between the stucco pillars, jerked to a stop just in time. It was impossible to go on. McLean and the inmates of other trailers all were huddled in the road in various stages of disheveled undress, hair and night-clothing streaming with rain, but oblivious of their appearance.

They turned awed faces as my headlights bathed them in brilliance, emphasizing their disorder. But none moved out of the way. It was as if each dared not leave the group which gave them the illusion of safety.

Paul and I leaped from opposite sides of the car, approached the terror-stricken group.

McLean shouted over the wind, "We're afraid to go nearer! That red light! And the screamings and shriekings coming from the trailer have been—gruesome!"

We pushed our way past him through the crowd, advanced on foot down the graveled road, hurried as fast as we could, unmindful of the uneven surface under our feet or the rain-filled pockets into which we stepped.

As we neared the trailer Paul held the crucifix aloft at arm's length before him. Gradually the howlings subsided as we advanced. Gradually the red glare began to leave the sky, and blackness started to creep over us.

A hush of foreboding then persisted.

I reached the trailer first. It was locked. The entrance and emergency exit doors did not yield under my hand, nor any of the windows. I swore to that later. Someone who had followed us ventured nearer now, thrust a big screw-driver into my hand, retreated again to safety.

I succeeded in forcing the door at last. I was the first to enter, to switch on the lights. God in his mercy decreed that. Then I blocked the shambles of the interior hastily from Paul's view.

I grabbed the India print from the couch, spread it over the hideously charred and fang-torn body of Donald Armstrong, lying among the fragments of the shattered crystal ball.

Had he broken it accidentally? Had he succeeded in calling up Alrinach and Alocer? Had they with Acham been too strong in their fury for the crystal ball to restrain?

I don't know. I'll never know. I know only what I saw. I know only what I had told him—no good could ever come of evil.

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